

Educators speak against Australian Education Union agreement betrayal

Our reporters

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Important statements of opposition and hostility towards the Australian Education Union (AEU) have been registered by teachers and school workers who have joined the almost 800-member Facebook group established by the Committee For Public Education.

The group, “Oppose Australian Education Union 2022 VGSA [Victorian Government Schools Agreement] draft agreement!” was formed to provide educators with the opportunity to discuss the AEU and Labor government’s sellout industrial agreement that slashed real wages and maintained the untenable working conditions within public schools.

The Committee For Public Education (CFPE) page provided educators with a democratic forum, after oppositional voices on the union’s Facebook page were systematically censored. The deletion and blocking of all critical comments formed one part of a wider union campaign of misinformation. Despite this, record opposition was registered, with nearly 40 percent voting “no” to the agreement through both delegates’ meetings and a state-wide ballot of all school workers, union and non-union members.

One secondary teacher with 20 years of teaching experience, including in Britain, wrote to explain why he resigned from the union, and now supports the work of the CFPE. “There is a totalitarian stench about the way the new agreement was pushed through,” he explained.

“To wit: the censuring of discussion and debate, the hyperbolic emails and the less than democratic push for a YES vote. I believe that there needs to be a paradigm shift in the way that we mobilise teachers in the quest for better workplace conditions. I support the CFPE’s perspective, and find it curious that some members of our Facebook group have lately interpreted this as all talk and no action—or, even more bewilderingly, just a lot of negative energy.

“I do not think that impatience is wise, nor is the quest for an immediate panacea feasible. It will take systemic change over time, arising from a groundswell of different thinking and articulated through statements of philosophy and ideology. Not just words, as some would argue, but kernels of thought that must underpin every practical action that follows. That concept is seemingly not cutting through for some people—too big picture perhaps, when some arguably just want a bit more

money and a lot less stress?”

The teacher concluded: “I’m not professing to have the vaguest idea about how your proposal of rank-and-file committees might work, or whether there are precedents elsewhere—in the education sector or otherwise—that might be encouraging. But it is an idea worth discussing, as our current system is somewhat broken—an observation that could similarly be made about much of our political machinery. I doubt whether any teacher could possibly disagree with the breadth of the CFPE’s ambitions, but we live in a cynical age, and some of that cynicism is yours to conquer.”

Significant numbers of teachers have quit the union in protest over the latest sellout agreement. Some saw their resignation as a protest to pressure the union to change course, and others wanted to offset lower real wages by ceasing to pay union dues. CFPE members have sought to clarify the dead-end perspective of pressuring the union, that anger alone cannot resolve the complex political problems educators confront, and encouraged the necessity of forming independent rank-and-file committees. This is an ongoing discussion.

An experienced educator posted his resignation letter in the group after 17 years as a union member. He, like many others, was outraged by emails from AEU state president Meredith Peace that demanded all union members endorse the agreement after it was narrowly passed by delegates in the first stage of the ratification process.

“It is the arrogance of their command that all members MUST now vote YES in the DET [Department of Education] ballot that is the final straw for me, and they should be called out for it,” the educator wrote. “It is undemocratic and bullyish. I’m done with them, and I’m not alone. I know many other colleagues, who are now voting with their feet and have already cancelled their memberships, or are seriously considering it.”

He continued: “I am calling out the outrageous strong-arm tactics that the AEU executive have used. Who are you to dictate to us that we ‘must support the majority position taken by members and vote yes’? Members are not beholden to the biased agenda of the executive, and you are not in your positions to dictate our will or our votes, nor to provide perfunctory advice or representation.”

In its statement on the latest AEU betrayal, “The Australian

Education Union betrayal of Victorian public school workers and the need for rank-and-file committees,” the CFPE noted: “Numerous teachers have quit the AEU in disgust over the latest betrayal. For some others, especially longer standing educators, the word ‘union’ remains associated with a collective defence of jobs, wages, and conditions. This reflects a certain inertia of both language and thought. In reality, the AEU does not unite educators and school workers, it divides them. It does not fight for improved wages and conditions, but works for precisely the opposite, organising defeat after defeat.”

Several teachers have written on the CFPE’s Facebook group about their previous loyalty to the union.

“I have always been a strong unionist,” **one public school teacher** explained. “My father instilled in me the importance of being in solidarity with fellow workers. Leaving the union was a very difficult decision. I have always felt strongly you cannot complain about conditions if you are not willing to make sacrifices and fight. Nothing is ever handed to you on a platter.”

“I have had a growing resentment with the union as I found each agreement didn’t seem that progressive. It was the pandemic that really solidified to me how self-serving the union leaders had become. No legitimate push back about our health, no real move to protect our well-being. The only reason we got to work from home was a decision from the government and had little to do with the union. The absurdity that THEY worked from home when we were forced in COVID-infected classrooms was very hard to process.”

The teacher continued: “Now with appalling conditions they are STILL doing nothing. The pandemic showed very clearly that as a profession, we really help the economy function. Without us taking care of kids, parents cannot work, the economy cannot run. I never thought of teaching like that but it was a reality everyone now saw. That to me is such a big bargaining chip, a position of strength that can easily be leveraged, but to no avail. Teaching has become harder and harder and when I reflect why, it’s because the union did not stand against those extra impositions. And finally, it is the undemocratic manner they silenced any opposition or challenge, acting like imperious overlords. So, with all that in mind, I could not abide by this union any more.”

Numerous teachers in the Facebook group have commented on their unsustainable workloads and inadequate wages, with several planning on leaving the profession.

A Melbourne secondary teacher commented: “We’ve bent over ‘for the love of the job’ for far too long. The agreement failed to tangibly address teachers concerns. The workload changes aren’t immediate and there is nothing about the reduction of planning days.

“The pay ‘increase’ is significantly less than inflation, which, on the back of working relentless hours and turning our skills upside down during COVID, is a slap in the face. I suspect a lot of members will become ex-members to recover at

least \$60 a month in union dues that the AEU did not secure through a wage increase. Our school was overwhelmingly a ‘no’ vote.

“There isn’t a long-term solution to the growing teacher shortage. Without the support of the government, my days in the system are numbered.”

Another educator commented on the lack of resources in public schools: “Nationally and internationally, the public sector continues to suffer from poor resourcing and funding. In schools, we don’t have the resources to do proper educational activities. We are severely understaffed and can’t get replacement teachers or fill urgent vacancies.

“The promises made by the AEU have come to nothing. I’ve attended a number of meetings, raising concerns about inflation and wages, conditions within schools, such as class sizes, but was told these were irrelevant issues.”

She also spoke of the impact of the pandemic: “Our school has stopped reporting COVID cases. Teachers and students are getting COVID and students are being sent to school. The workload is overwhelming, it seems to have doubled, including through supporting students absent with the virus. Some staff have been really ill and considered hospitalisation and some still suffer from earlier bouts of COVID.”

Many educators in the Facebook group have indicated support and gratitude for the CFPE, with one teacher describing the organisation as an “encouraging voice to champion public education and speak to the heart of the matters faced by those in the profession.”

Much more remains to be politically clarified. As one teacher wrote: “I am not sure about the concept of a rank-and-file committee, how our voices would be heard, and I would like to know more? Given how the union has treated us, we need to communicate and discuss a strategy that takes us forward.”

The CFPE is encouraging all educators to continue the dialogue and attend our online meeting being held on June 19, 1.00 pm: “The crisis of public education, the betrayal of the unions and the need for independent rank-and-file committees.”

Register in advance and promote the meeting among educators, students, colleagues and friends!

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout/

Facebook: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: @CFPE_Australia



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