Anger toward the Australian Education Union (AEU) among teachers and school workers in the state of Victoria continues to find expression following its imposition of a regressive, four-year industrial agreement.

The deal struck by the union and the state Labor government centrally involves a substantial real wage cut, with nominal salaries rising by less than 2 percent a year while official inflation skyrockets above 5 percent.

In addition, the deal did nothing to mitigate the untenable workloads and onerous working conditions within the schools, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The enormous crisis of the grossly underfunded public education system will be exacerbated.

Despite systematic union censorship and misinformation, record numbers of teachers, nearly 40 percent, voted against the agreement in delegates meetings held in March and in a general ballot conducted in May. Since then, significant numbers of teachers, likely thousands, have resigned from the AEU.

Many have turned toward the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), which spearheaded the fight against the AEU-Labor government deal. The committee’s Facebook group, which was established to coordinate opposition to the agreement, continues to grow and now has more than 800 teachers and school workers following it.

Two media outlets, EducationHQ and 3CR Radio, recently interviewed members of the CFPE.

*EducationHQ* is an online publisher that also prints several magazines, including *Australian Teacher*, which is widely distributed in school staff rooms. Its July 13 article (paywalled but available here), “‘Monstrous betrayal’: Furious Vic teachers abandon AEU over wage agreement,” interviewed several teachers who had quit the union over the sell-out deal.

The article also featured comments from CFPE national convenor Sue Phillips. “We described [the agreement] as a monstrous betrayal,” she told the publication. “What the AEU argued on this issue [of wages] was that inflation in Victoria was somehow different to what it was nationally. I mean, it was a complete joke. It’s a massive wage cut, and that’s for four years.”

*EducationHQ* noted that the CFPE had stated that the teacher unions had separated and isolated industrial campaigns of teachers in Victoria and New South Wales. Phillips was again quoted: “One of the things that we’ve continually stressed throughout the campaign is that this agreement that the AEU signed off on was not a mistake, or some sort of weakly-devised campaign, or the result of poor negotiating skills—it was consciously planned by the AEU bureaucrats.

“They were prepared and have been for the last decade to impose the demands of the Labor government and in particular, to block off any sort of industrial action or any unified campaign of teachers across borders.”

The publication reported the CFPE’s perspective. “Anger and frustration is not going to resolve this problem,” Phillips explained. “Teachers have got to develop new forms of organisation, and that’s why we continually have stressed the fight for rank-and-file committees at the workplaces, independent of the unions. That’s what we’re really fighting for.”

Another member of the CFPE, Patrick O’Connor, spoke on community radio station 3CR last Friday. The half-hour “Think Again” program was devoted to the AEU betrayal (audio available here), with host Jennifer Borrell asking O’Connor to elaborate on different aspects of the experience that teachers and school workers have passed through.

The CFPE member explained the austerity objectives behind the union-government deal. “In Victoria there is Australia’s highest state debt and deficits as a result of the pandemic and the necessary lockdown measures that were imposed here, in tandem with the enormous handouts to big business that the Andrews government implemented during that time,” O’Connor said.
“Now the pressure is on from the financial markets and the credit rating agencies for austerity measures, for the debt and deficit to be reduced on the back of the working class. That’s where this agreement ultimately comes from—one very direct way you can reduce debt and deficits, as far as the ruling class is concerned, is to undermine the wages and conditions of public sector workers. And so what the AEU has done is to create a really dangerous precedent that’s not just going to affect teachers in Victoria but public sector workers across the country.”

O’Connor spoke on the AEU’s campaign of misinformation and censorship, connecting the union’s operation in ramming the agreement through with its enforcement of the reopening of the schools at the beginning of the year amid record-high COVID-19 infections.

“AEU censorship very sharply emerged last December, with regard to the COVID crisis,” he explained. “The school summer break coincided with the upsurge in the spread of infections, the Omicron variant erupted, and as teachers were preparing to come back for Term 1 this year, there was widespread concern over the situation in the schools.”

O’Connor said the reopening drive was “a pro-business measure that had nothing to do with children’s wellbeing or education. This was about having kids in schools so their parents could get back to their workplaces, in order to generate profit on behalf of business. That’s why all the COVID restrictions that impinged on the profit interests of business and finance capital were lifted, and the union went along with all of it.”

The CFPE member spoke on the role of the AEU, and responded to the host’s remarks that she and the program were very “pro-union.” He said: “It’s important to understand what the Australian Education Union bureaucracy is. Its senior officials earn a quarter of a million dollars annually, which places them within the top 1 percent of all income earners. Now this creates a situation in which the union bureaucracy comprises a distinct social stratum, whose interests are very different to the interests of ordinary teachers and school workers.”

Borrell responded: “I wonder how they can justify that … brokering a deal that has a substantial wage cut for teachers, while earning a quarter of a million dollars as a representative of teachers’ interests?”

O’Connor replied: “Well the union doesn’t represent teachers’ interests, that’s the point. These privileges derive from their collaboration with the government and its diktats, that’s the basis of their privileges.

“Now this of course is not just a question of the AEU. We’ve seen a whole shift amongst the trade unions. You raised earlier the question of the unions providing ‘essential collective bargaining power for workers’—well it’s been a long time since that’s been in any way a reality. Over the last four decades with the emergence of globalisation, unions not just in Australia but internationally have offered their services to business and governments, imposing job cuts, imposing wage cuts, imposing deteriorating conditions.

“That’s why the Committee for Public Education has called on educators to take the struggle out of the hands of the bureaucracy and to form independent rank and file committees in every school and community.”

The interview concluded with O’Connor briefly outlining aspects of the CFPE’s and Socialist Equality Party’s perspective.

“The crisis of public education is in the final analysis a reflection of wider crisis of international capitalism,” he said. “The profit system is breaking down. It’s threatening humanity with unprecedented catastrophe, whether you look at the question of climate change, the threat of nuclear war that has been intensified through US imperialism’s aggression against Russia and China, there are growing attacks on democratic rights and living standards.

“That’s why the Committee for Public Education has insisted throughout that the fight for decent conditions in schools for both teachers and students is above all a political fight, and one that requires the taking up of an internationalist and socialist perspective.”

Contact the CFPE:
Committee for Public Education
Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com
Facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/678929646894212
www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation
Twitter: @CFPE_Australia

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact