

Australian Education Union conference underscores collusion with state Labor government after wage cutting agreement

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The recent annual conference of the Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU) featured Premier Daniel Andrews as a keynote speaker. It came just weeks after the union, in partnership with the Andrews' state Labor government, rammed through a four-year agreement that involved a major real wage cut and regressive working conditions.

Nearly 90,000 teachers and school workers will receive base salary increases of less than 2 percent a year, under conditions where the official inflation rate will reach nearly 8 percent this year, with actual costs of living for basics like housing and food skyrocketing far higher. At the same time, a dire situation has emerged in the underfunded, understaffed, and COVID-affected public schools.

The AEU's public embrace of Daniel Andrews had a provocative character.

The wage-cutting agreement was only rammed through because of union censorship and misinformation, with a record near-40 percent of members voting to reject the deal. Numerous angry and frustrated teachers have since resigned from the union.

The affluent bureaucracy that controls the AEU has nothing but contempt for the concerns and sentiments of ordinary school workers. It clearly saw no reason to pass up the opportunity to parade the de facto alliance between the union and the government by rubbing shoulders with the premier and other representatives of the political establishment. Others appearing at the July 30 conference were state education minister Natalie Hutchins and the Greens' education spokesperson Sam Hibbins.

In the keynote speech, which mostly comprised motherhood statements about the role of education,

Andrews' emphasised the government's reliance on and collaboration with the AEU. "You are a strong, powerful, mighty union," he declared. "I am grateful to you all. The success and prosperity of the state relies on you."

If the premier had chosen to speak more directly he might have instead said: "The success of my government's austerity program relies on you, together with your fellow trade union bureaucrats covering other public sector workers."

Victoria has the highest debt and deficit of any state government in Australia. Big business and finance capital have made clear their intent to make the working class bear the burden for lowering these, including through job cuts and real wage reductions in the public sector. The Labor government is determined to deliver, working closely with the trade unions, as the AEU deal against teachers and school workers demonstrated.

The AEU has supported the Andrews government since its coming to office in 2014.

Prior to the unveiling of the wage cutting agreement, union officials sought to channel growing teacher anger and opposition behind the parliamentary establishment. In the prior twelve months of behind closed doors negotiations, little substantive information was reported to the membership regarding the content of the discussions.

While union negotiators were holding cordial discussions with government and Department of Education officials, union members were blocked from taking any strike action, and instead diverted into futile letter-writing campaigns and lobbying visits to government parliamentarians.

Once the deal was announced in February, what followed was a propaganda campaign of misinformation, alongside the censorship of oppositional voices and demands by the union bureaucrats that all members must vote yes.

Continuing the campaign of misinformation and union kow-towing, before the agreement was even rubber-stamped by the Fair Work Commission, in June AEU state president Meredith Peace publicly hailed James Merlino, as he announced his retirement as education minister.

Peace declared, “By driving significant investment in school buildings and facilities, leading important changes and delivering additional funding for students with disability and for mental health support, and addressing excessive teacher workload, among many other things, his positive impact will be felt well into the future.”

What a fraud! Merlino’s “legacy” is grossly inadequate investment in public school infrastructure, Victoria remaining the state with the lowest per student public funding, a still-privatised student disability funding assessment system that rewards a transnational corporation for denying assistance to children in need, and excessive teacher workloads that are continuing to lead to widespread teacher mental health issues, burnout and withdrawal from the profession.

While the AEU bureaucracy enthusiastically supports the Labor government’s measures, it is bitterly hostile to educators who oppose these policies from a socialist perspective.

Teacher members of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), who politically led the opposition to the wage cutting agreement, were denied admission as observers to the AEU conference where Andrews spoke. These included longstanding union members, such as veteran teacher Will Marshall. A union official insisted that applications to attend had been received too late to be considered “by earlier Executive and Council meetings of the AEU.” Why members of a union are required to apply for permission to the bureaucracy to observe a state conference was not explained by the official.

The real reason for the exclusion was to shut out any opponents of the AEU-Labor partnership. The anti-democratic operations of the union underscores the importance of building rank-and-file committees,

independent of the AEU, to take forward the necessary political struggle for a properly funded public education system, with decent wages and conditions for all school workers.

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