

Australia: Victorian educators reject AEU-Labor sellout—Build rank-and-file committees to take the struggle forward!

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In a blow to the Australian Education Union (AEU) bureaucracy and the Allan Labor government, Victorian public school teachers, Education Support (ES) staff and school principals have voted 57.7 percent to 42.3 percent to reject the union's proposed four-year industrial agreement. This is the first time in more than four decades that educators have voted down an AEU-endorsed deal.

The vote is an indictment of the agreement cooked up in secret between AEU officials and Premier Jacinta Allan's government following the powerful March 24 statewide strike, in which more than 35,000 educators marched through Melbourne. That strike demonstrated the fighting spirit of educators, winning broad support among parents and workers.

The AEU leadership's response was to water down and call off further industrial action, return to closed-door negotiations and produce a deal that locks in real pay cuts and does nothing to cap class sizes or reduce crushing workloads.

The overwhelming no vote was registered despite anti-democratic mechanisms the AEU deployed in an attempt to ram the deal through. This was not a one-member-one-vote ballot. Instead, a delegate, assigned from the union's internal database, cast a vote on behalf of every 20 financial members after a sub-branch meeting. There were no rank-and-file scrutineers, and no means for members to confirm their sub-branch's votes were accurately recorded. The union apparatus controlled every lever of the process and still lost.

That result was achieved despite a systematic campaign of misinformation, censorship and intimidation. The AEU deleted critical comments from its Facebook pages, blocked members who asked legitimate questions, and ruled opposition resolutions out of order at stage-managed "briefings."

These were the same methods the AEU used to ram through a 2022 sellout agreement, which included pay "rises" of less than 2 percent per annum, locking teachers into real wage cuts throughout the cost-of-living crisis. The rejection of the 2026 sellout is not only a response to this agreement, but reflects widespread anger among educators over the 2022 deal and decades of regressive agreements.

The Bureaucracy's False Claims

In the immediate aftermath of the vote, AEU state president Justin Mullaly rushed out a statement claiming the union had "listened to

and heard" members' concerns and that the way forward was to "stick together" and "stay united."

This is a brazen fraud. The union leadership has no intention of allowing this opposition vote to be the last word. It has sought to ram through attacks on educators' conditions, in defiance of mass opposition, demonstrating that it stands on the side of the big business Labor government and the corporate elite. Educators, be warned, they will now turn their attention to imposing the demands of the government in another form.

The call for "unity" is equally hollow. The AEU has systematically divided the workforce. ES staff, among the lowest-paid workers in schools, many holding second jobs while performing increasingly complex medical, special needs and behavioural support roles, were offered a deal even worse than that presented to teachers, with a one-off allowance substituting for a genuine wage increase. The bureaucracy made no effort to unite teachers and ES workers in a common fight. Instead, it sought to split them and ram through separate outcomes.

Nor has the AEU called for unity with educators in other states. Teachers in Tasmania, Queensland, the ACT and nationally are confronting the same crisis of real wage cuts, ballooning workloads and collapsing school infrastructure. Thousands are leaving the profession due to unbearable conditions and burnout, deepening the staffing crisis in public education. The AEU has deliberately kept these struggles isolated, fearing precisely the kind of unified national movement that could pose a genuine political challenge to the federal Labor government and the financial elite it serves.

Within hours of the result, the union's Joint Primary and Secondary Council passed a resolution that amounts to a desperate operation to regain control of a membership in revolt. The same officials who stitched up the May 15 deal, which they assured members was the best deal ever, are now appealing for "immediate" negotiations with the Department of Education. The resolution commits the union to "restart negotiations" immediately, before any consultation with members has even taken place.

The centrepiece of the bureaucracy's "way forward" is a member survey, to be emailed next week. This is a classic bureaucratic manoeuvre to atomise the membership, replace mass meetings and collective discussion with individualised tick-boxes, and then claim to have "listened." The resolution states that survey results will "inform the decisions" of the bureaucracy—not determine them.

The Joint Council, a body of 120 delegates dominated by the union apparatus, will make the actual decisions at a meeting on July 17,

almost a month away. The purpose of the delay is to stall, dissipate the momentum generated by the no vote, and buy time for the bureaucracy to concoct another sellout behind closed doors.

The AEU stated that it is “lifting” its “suspension” of industrial action, but announced only the toothless “bans and limitations on work” that were previously in place. There is no call for stop-works, mass meetings or democratic forums where teachers and ES staff can debate strategy together. The resolution itself notes that “many members have recognised the strong pay outcomes” in the government’s offer, signalling that the bureaucracy intends to push essentially the same wage framework with cosmetic workload adjustments. The AEU apparatus is fighting to preserve its role as the industrial police force of the government.

Assisting this process are pseudo-left groups such as “Socialists in Schools” and “Fight the Crisis,” which claim that one-day strikes can pressure the government and “empower our negotiators” to secure a better deal. Sending the same bureaucrats back to negotiate is a dead-end perspective. Its purpose is to keep educators’ rebellion trapped within the confines of the union apparatus.

A Political Crisis for Labor

The rejection of the deal creates a political crisis for the Labor governments, not only in Victoria, but federally. Labor, at the national level and in most of the states, is tasked by the corporate and financial elite with implementing sweeping cuts to social spending to make workers pay for the deepening crisis of capitalism.

The Allan government, like every state and federal Labor government, is implementing an austerity program dictated by the corporate elite. Victoria is carrying out public sector sackings, pay cuts, and the destruction of public housing. Federally, the Albanese government’s May budget contained \$63.8 billion in cuts to social spending over four years, including the gutting of the NDIS, the largest cut to a social program in Australian history. The impact of these measures will be borne especially by ES staff and teachers not only in Victoria but nationally. Meanwhile, tens of billions are being poured into AUKUS and the US-led war against Iran.

This agenda depends on the ability of the union bureaucracies, including the AEU, to enforce sellouts and suppress workers’ opposition. The no vote is an expression of the fact that these corporate mechanisms are breaking down.

A Global Rebellion

This is part of an international rebellion of workers worldwide who are rejecting sellout deals imposed by trade union bureaucracies in collusion with governments and employers. From the United States to Britain, from New Zealand to across Europe, workers are confronting the same reality, union apparatuses that function as instruments of class discipline, not class struggle.

At the Committee for Public Education online public meeting on June 14, international contributions highlighted this global experience. A California teacher described how the California Teachers

Association ran a “We Can’t Wait” campaign only to force through contracts that failed to keep pace with inflation. A New Zealand correspondent recounted how primary school teachers initially voted down a sellout deal, only for the union to present essentially the same agreement and wear them down into accepting it. The lesson is clear: a no vote, while crucial, is not enough. The union apparatus will regroup, repackage the offer, and try again.

The Way Forward: Rank-and-File Committees

The task now is to take the struggle out of the hands of the AEU bureaucracy entirely. The CFPE has consistently argued that defeating this sellout requires building independent rank-and-file committees in every school, organisations democratically controlled by teachers and ES workers themselves, free from the censorship and sabotage of the union apparatus.

Such committees are needed to break through the isolation the AEU imposes, share information across schools, formulate demands based on real needs — not what the government and union decide is “affordable”—and build solidarity with other sections of workers under attack: council workers, health workers, early childhood educators, university staff. They must connect nationally and internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

The demands that flow from this struggle go beyond any single agreement. An immediate 40 percent pay increase to recover past losses including ES staff, with automatic cost-of-living adjustments. Maximum class sizes of 15 to 20. A minimum of eight hours weekly during school hours for planning, assessment and collaboration. An end to public funding for elite private schools and the redirection of billions into a free, first-class public education for all.

Educators have already shown their willingness to fight. The decisive task now is to build the organisations and leadership carrying that struggle forward.

The defence of public education requires a socialist perspective. The resources exist to provide high-quality schools and decent pay and conditions, but they are monopolised by the billionaires, banks and corporations. These resources must be placed under public ownership and democratic control, and redirected to meet social need—not private profit.



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