

Australian educators discuss way forward after rejection of Labor-union sellout deal in Victoria

Our correspondents

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On June 14, the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the Australian educators' rank-and-file network, convened an online public meeting titled, "Vote No to AEU-Labor sellout! Build independent rank-and-file committees! Fund education not war!" Teachers and student teachers spoke out against the intolerable conditions in public schools and the Australian Education Union's (AEU) suppression of opposition to its proposed four-year sellout deal with the Victorian state Labor government.

The meeting was held as the AEU was seeking to ram through a members' ratification vote on the deal, which featured real-wage cuts amid the cost-of-living crisis, and would do nothing to address soaring class sizes, workloads and staff shortages.

The well-attended meeting placed the struggle in its international context, with contributions from educators in the United States and New Zealand detailing how trade union bureaucracies across the globe are collaborating with governments to impose real wage cuts, intensified workloads and austerity on the working class, while billions of dollars are diverted into militarism and war.

Speakers and contributors explained the need for educators to break out of the AEU-Labor straitjacket and form independent rank-and-file committees in schools to take control of the struggle out of the hands of the AEU apparatus.

In the week that followed, Victorian public school teachers, education support (ES) staff and principals delivered a historic blow to the AEU bureaucracy and the state and federal Labor governments. They voted down the sellout deal by 57.7 percent to 42.3 percent—the first time in more than four decades that educators in Victoria have rejected an AEU-endorsed agreement.

The result was achieved despite the union's anti-democratic voting procedures, censorship of opposition and stage-managed "briefings." That is an expression of the growing international rebellion of workers against the assault on wages and conditions.

Educators who participated in the CFPE meeting spoke about the issues raised at the meeting and the No vote that followed.

Lisa, a primary school teacher with 15 years' experience in Melbourne's southeast, commented that the CFPE meeting was informative and a very democratic forum. "It was interesting to hear what university students, lecturers and other educators had to say about what is happening more broadly, including war, government spending priorities and conditions internationally. The discussion about censorship was important too. It isn't just happening in the AEU. We heard examples from universities and internationally.

"I've learnt a lot through the CFPE. I want to know what's

happening in the world because it affects the decisions that governments make and ultimately affects us."

Lisa criticised the diversion of public resources away from essential social services. "I think taxpayer money should be going towards the most vulnerable groups in Australia. I don't think our money should be leaving the country to fund military operations while pensioners struggle to pay rent, people can't afford medication and schools remain under-resourced."

Lisa welcomed the rejection of the AEU-Labor agreement, saying educators had delivered a clear message that worsening workloads and deteriorating conditions could no longer be ignored.

"I've been teaching for 15 years and this is the first time I've seen teachers reject an AEU-endorsed deal. People understood the implications of voting no, but for many of us it was about making a stand and letting the government and the union officials know that our voices matter. I think we're just getting tired of hearing there's no money, no resources and no alternative. This was our way of fighting back."

The No vote was not primarily about wages, she said. "At the end of the day, we don't do this job for the money. We do it for the students. But we can't do our best for them if we're constantly run down and overworked with tasks that aren't directly related to teaching."

Lisa said support for the No campaign was particularly strong among Education Support staff. "We have a large number of ES staff at our school and the majority voted no. Many teachers openly said we were standing in solidarity with them. They're physically hurt at work all the time. They show up every day and without them it would be incredibly difficult to do our jobs. We need them to stay in schools and we need to pay them accordingly."

Lisa was opposed to the role of AEU officials during the campaign. "At one regional meeting, members who raised questions on behalf of their sub-branches were repeatedly shut down. They were genuinely asking questions in a respectful way. Initially they were told the question was too much to unpack and that it would be discussed later. When members pressed for clarification, the discussion was simply closed down.

"A member asked what had come out of the negotiations because we had submitted claims for a 35 percent pay rise and workload reductions and we ended up with nothing close to that. The official's response was basically that the government had said this was the best offer available and that was it. Take it or leave it.

"The CFPE meeting was excellent because there was no censorship. Everyone had a right to express their views and opinions without

feeling judged. If someone had joined the meeting and argued that teachers should vote yes, I don't believe they would have been censored, muted or cut off. Compare that to the AEU meetings."

Lisa said she wanted to learn more about the rank-and-file committee perspective advanced at the meeting by the CFPE. "My understanding before the meeting was that you had to leave the union to be involved. What I learned is that rank-and-file committees are bringing together union and non-union workers who want democratic control over decisions that affect them. That definitely got me thinking and wanting to find out more."

Kellie, a University of Melbourne PhD student, said one of the most striking aspects of the CFPE meeting was hearing first-hand accounts from educators and teaching students about conditions in schools.

In particular, she was struck by the experiences of teaching students undertaking school placements. "One person spoke about their first day on placement and seeing a teacher have a meltdown, distressed and crying in the staffroom after dealing with a very loud and disruptive class. That really stayed with me."

She commented how the meeting underlined broader social problems that originate outside the classroom. "Parents often take out their frustrations with the system on teachers, but they're responding to the same social pressures that are creating problems in education."

Speaking on the No vote, Kellie said: "It is clear that the AEU were actively censoring people and preventing discussion. They're behaving in undemocratic ways. Clearly voting no isn't sufficient on its own. There needs to be some kind of separate organisation that can actually organise workers to use the power they have, including the ability to strike, to fight for what they need."

Kellie welcomed the democratic character of the CFPE meeting. "The fact that so many people were invited to speak made the meeting an order of magnitude more democratic than any union meeting I've heard people describe. People were able to raise their questions openly and contribute to the discussion. Educators need organisations through which they can freely discuss their experiences and collectively develop a strategy to defend public education."

Jadranka, a retired Casual Relief Teacher (CRT) who worked in schools in the northern working-class suburbs of Melbourne, commented: "In the 25 years I've been in Australia, I don't know that the teachers' union has ever supported teachers. When I worked as a CRT for about 10 years, I was always in survival mode because of conditions."

Jadranka said the CFPE meeting's discussion of war and international developments was important because these issues directly affect working people and young people around the world.

Commenting on the No vote, she said: "Teachers really need to fight for their basic rights. The unions just do what the government want. This is a chance to fight for better conditions. I think rank-and-file committees are a good tool for workers—a good starting point."

Susan, a public servant from Melbourne, said the CFPE meeting showed that "the latest union deal is connected with everything in the rest of the world. Whatever goes on overseas impacts on us. There is a real similarity between the US, UK and us."

"I found the conversations at the meeting thought-provoking. The commonality of experiences of teachers in different regions was evident. Schools are under-resourced, there is a huge impost on teachers, the government wants to divide and conquer. Teachers confront bad student-to-teacher ratios, not enough pay, and teachers burning out..."

"There are millions of dollars for defence and AUKUS, and yet with

the most critical needs such as educating young people or early childhood there is nothing. The NDIS was mismanaged from the start. The government privatised the system and now the most vulnerable groups are suffering the most. Many people are being moved into mainstream services but there has been no extra support that went with them."

Amal, who is studying for a Master of Education in New South Wales specialising in primary teaching, described the CFPE meeting as "eye-opening." She said one of the most important aspects of the meeting was the placing of educational issues within a political and international context.

"We look at how these issues affect the working class, and we look at the worldview as well. The important recurring message we're getting at the moment is the illegal war on Iran... It's a much bigger thing, and the meetings allow you to see things from that perspective..."

"I feel the meeting gave us an opportunity to all come together as teachers. One of the issues that was raised is that we're being divided into Victorian teachers, New South Wales teachers and teachers in other states, and that's done on purpose. When we hold meetings like this, it allows us to take control of the narrative, so we know we're fighting for the same things."

As a future teacher, Amal said she found the reports on conditions in schools concerning. "When I was listening to teachers talk about their conditions, it was a bit confronting because I'm obviously enjoying my course, but then you're hearing the reality from the ground. I'm listening to stories about people going into teaching and then leaving within three or four years."

Reflecting on the wider issues, Amal said: "A lot of resources are being diverted into warfare—in Iran, Gaza and Lebanon—and you look at those figures and ask why that money isn't being allocated to classrooms, when resources are one of the biggest issues facing education."

Bruce, a retired university academic, said the reports and contributions at the CFPE meeting showed "the intolerable conditions in public schools, especially the workloads and hours worked."

He said he appreciated the way that the meeting provided a platform for educators to speak out against the censorship and suppression of the AEU. "Yes, that's what educators need," he commented.

Bruce described as "shocking" what was exposed at the meeting about the trade union sellouts of teachers in New South Wales, New Zealand and California, as well as across the university sector. He said educators needed to draw conclusions from these bitter experiences. They had to form rank-and-file committees.

He agreed with the list of demands outlined at the meeting, such as an immediate 40 percent pay increase to recover past losses, including for ES staff, with automatic cost-of-living adjustments, maximum class sizes of 15 to 20, and the redirection of billions of dollars into a free, first-class public education for all.



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