Australia: Union resumes secret negotiations to prepare another sellout of Victorian educators

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The Australian Education Union (AEU) has resumed closed-door negotiations with the Allan Labor government before its own member survey has even closed and more than a week before the July 17 State Council meeting supposedly convened to discuss educators' demands.

This is a flagrant demonstration of the bureaucracy's contempt for Victorian public-school teachers and Education Support (ES) staff, who overwhelmingly rejected the union's May 15 "in principle" agreement by 57.7 percent to 42.3 percent.

The bureaucracy is not consulting educators. It is already working with the government to repackage the same agreement members voted down, with only cosmetic changes designed to make another sellout easier to impose.

The central issue is not how much "pressure" is applied to the AEU, but whether educators draw the necessary political conclusions from the "no" vote, and begin to take matters into their own hands, forming independent, democratic organisations of struggle.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) warned throughout the ballot that voting "no" would be only the first step. The decisive next step is the formation of rank-and-file committees outside the straitjacket of the union apparatus, which functions not to defend educators but as an instrument of the Labor government for enforcing austerity in public education

Victorian teachers and ES staff rejected an agreement that proposed a nominal 28 percent wage increase over four years—far short of recovering years of real wage losses—while ES staff were fobbed off with a one-off allowance instead of a permanent wage rise. The deal contained no enforceable measures to reduce workloads or class sizes and would have prevented industrial action until 2030.

The vote expressed accumulated anger over years of declining living standards, intensifying workloads, chronic understaffing and the anti-democratic methods of the AEU bureaucracy. It also repudiated the 2022 agreement, which imposed annual pay increases of less than 2 percent while inflation surged.

The "no" vote sent shockwaves through the AEU leadership, the Allan government and the political establishment. For the first time in decades, the bureaucracy's established methods of imposing another sellout had broken down. That is why it has moved so rapidly to regain control.

Only days after the vote, the AEU announced a member survey, claiming it wanted to hear from educators before the July 17 State council. This week before the survey had even closed, negotiations with the government resumed, despite repeated claims that members' responses would guide discussion at the July 17 State Council meeting.

This sequence of events exposes the union's consultation process as a fraud. The State council resolution adopted after the vote made clear that members' responses would merely "inform" the bureaucracy's decisions, not determine them. The same was true of the original log of claims, which served as little more than window dressing for the bureaucrats before being discarded once negotiations began.

The survey itself was a delaying tactic, designed to contain the rebellion, dissipate the momentum of the "no" vote and create a paper trail so the bureaucracy could claim it had "consulted" members.

Now even that pretence has been abandoned. Before the survey has closed or State Council met, the bureaucracy has already resumed negotiations behind educators' backs. By the time State Council convenes, another agreement—or at least its framework—may already have been stitched together and delegates presented with a fait accompli.

Whatever emerges from these negotiations will remain within the Allan government's budget dictated by the financial markets and the corporations.

The way forward

The CFPE has consistently argued that defeating this sellout requires the building of independent rank-and-file committees

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in workplaces, democratically controlled by teachers and ES staff. These are not merely more militant unions. They are the means through which educators can take control of their own struggle.

Rank-and-file committees would break the isolation imposed by the AEU apparatus, connect educators across schools, regions and state-wide, bypassing the anti-democratic measures and censorship imposed on union social media and meetings.

They would establish democratic control, with educators sharing information, setting the agenda, debating strategy and deciding the course of action. They would formulate real demands based on what educators and students need: full restoration of lost wages, automatic cost-of-living adjustments, drastically reduced class sizes, guaranteed planning time, fully funded ES positions and properly resourced public education, redirecting billions from elite private schools into public education.

The committees would build solidarity. The AEU has deliberately divided the workforce, offering ES staff an even worse deal than teachers and keeping Victorian educators isolated from colleagues in other states and from broader sections of workers under attack, including council workers, health workers, early childhood educators and university staff. Rank-and-file committees would unite teachers and ES staff, union and non-union in a common struggle and link up nationally and internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

Most importantly, they would advance the struggle politically. The fight for decent wages and conditions in public schools cannot be separated from the broader struggle against state and federal Labor governments, and the profit system that subordinates all social needs to corporate wealth. Educators are not only up against the Victorian administration but also the Albanese federal government which is channeling more than $60 billion yearly into the war machine, while making the biggest ever cuts to social programs such as the NDIS. The resources exist to provide high-quality schools and decent conditions for educators, but they are monopolised by the banks, corporations and the wealthy elite. The AEU is an instrument of this program of austerity.

In the wake of the “no” vote, pseudo-left groups such as “Socialists in Schools” and “Fight the Crisis” have continued to insist that educators should remain within the AEU framework, claiming that the vote will “empower the negotiators” and that further limited industrial action can pressure the bureaucracy into securing a better agreement. Such a perspective is a political dead end.

Events themselves have already refuted it. The bureaucracy has not responded to the rebellion of educators by turning towards the membership but turned immediately back towards the government.

The betrayals of the AEU do not arise from weak leadership, timid personalities or insufficient pressure from below. They arise from the bureaucracy’s social function. Integrated into the state and politically tied to the Labor Party, the union apparatus exists to contain workers’ struggles within the limits dictated by government budgets and corporate profitability.

The “no” vote declared that educators would no longer accept real wage cuts, escalating workloads, the surrender of their right to strike until 2030 or the anti-democratic methods of the union bureaucracy. To return the struggle to the very officials repudiated by that vote—bureaucrats paid more than $250,000 a year, over twice the salary of the most experienced teachers and around four times that of many ES staff—would strip it of its political meaning.

A new step is needed

Another sellout is already being prepared behind closed doors, aimed at once again binding educators to a four-year no-strike clause amid a deepening social and economic crisis. This makes the formation of rank-and-file committees an urgent necessity.

Every day that educators wait gives the bureaucracy more time to finalise its betrayal. Every day spent trusting the union to “consult” members strengthens the grip of the same apparatus that has overseen decades of declining wages and deteriorating conditions.

Some educators hesitate, having been told for decades that the union is the only vehicle for struggle and that any organisation outside it is “divisive.” But the experiences of the past month, together with the accumulated experience of previous struggles, have exposed the opposite.

The powerful March 24 strike mobilising more than 35,000 educators showed the willingness and determination to fight, and the **“**no” vote was a significant step forward, but was only the beginning. To return the struggle to the same officials who have already resumed closed-door negotiations is to guarantee another sellout. The way forward is to build rank-and-file committees, uniting union and non-union educators in workplaces and taking the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the apparatus.

The CFPE calls on educators to carefully review the analysis and record of the CFPE and take the next step and make contact to assist in forming committees and linking up with educators across Victoria in building a unified movement independent of the union bureaucracy.

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