

Australia: Survey reveals determination of Victorian educators to fight as union calls 1-day strike

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An Australian Education Union (AEU) survey of Victorian public school educators has delivered another blow to the union bureaucracy, revealing overwhelming support for sustained industrial action just weeks after teachers and Education Support (ES) staff rejected its sellout agreement with the state Labor government with 57.7 percent voting against.

The historic “no” vote was not an isolated protest. It marked a growing rebellion against the AEU apparatus and the Allan Labor government. The bureaucracy responded by seeking to regain control—delaying any broader mobilisation, channelling opposition into a survey as a diversion and resuming closed-door negotiations with the government.

But the survey has confirmed the opposition, with an overwhelming majority of educators declaring their readiness to take statewide strike action and almost three-quarters supporting multiple 24-hour stoppages.

This development confirms the warnings made by the Committee for Public Education (CFPE). The struggle cannot be left in the hands of the same union apparatus that negotiated, endorsed and aggressively sought to impose the sellout deal through censorship and a series of anti-democratic measures.

The “no” vote is only the beginning of the struggle. The actions of the union bureaucracy only confirm that it will do everything in its power to cut an alternative path to a sellout of the teachers.

The CFPE has called for the establishment of democratic, independent rank-and-file committees in schools, regions and across the state to transfer control of the struggle to educators themselves. The urgent task is to organise this opposition, prevent the bureaucracy from regaining control and stop another sellout being stitched up behind the backs of educators.

Faced with mounting opposition, the AEU’s Joint Primary and Secondary Sector Council voted on July 14 to call a 24-hour statewide strike on Thursday, July 23, together with a series of bans.

The resolution, however, calls only a single 24-hour stoppage and advances no concrete demands that must be met before any new agreement is endorsed. Instead, it repeatedly defines the objective as obtaining a “revised pay and conditions offer”

from the Labor government.

In other words, the bureaucrats who stitched up the last sellout deal will determine what is discussed, what constitutes an acceptable “revised offer” and whether and when further industrial action will take place. Having insisted the rejected agreement was the best that could be achieved, the bureaucracy is now preparing another deal acceptable to the government.

The danger is that the bureaucracy will use the July 23 strike to let off steam, regain its authority and channel the growing opposition behind negotiations for a repackaged sellout with cosmetic modifications.

The AEU’s survey asked educators how it was that they would participate in a 24-hour stop-work action. In response, 74.4 percent said “very likely” and another 13.5 percent “likely”—a combined 87.9 percent. Even more significantly, 56.2 percent said they were “very likely” and 18.2 percent “likely” to participate in more than one 24-hour stoppage—a combined 74.4 percent.

The AEU resumed negotiations with the government before the survey had even closed. The bureaucracy sought to channel the mass opposition expressed in the “no” vote back into a process it controlled, hoping that the momentum could be dissipated and educators’ anger contained.

There is a glaring disparity between the readiness of members to fight and the course laid out by the AEU leadership.

Despite almost three-quarters of respondents indicating they would likely participate in multiple 24-hour stoppages, the Joint Council has authorised only a single one-day strike. Any further action remains entirely in the hands of the union apparatus.

The resolution states that the AEU Branch Executive and Joint Council will “continue to monitor negotiations and the campaign,” with “further escalation of industrial action to be considered” at another Joint Council meeting scheduled for July 31, “or sooner should that be required.”

The AEU has not called a mass meeting of educators to discuss and decide the way forward where the rank and file can debate and vote on the demands to be fought for and determine the course of industrial action. This leaves every critical

decision in the hands of the union apparatus.

The July 14 resolution claims to act “in light of member feedback via the VGSA survey.” But the AEU had already returned to negotiations before the survey had closed.

What demands has the union leadership put to the government? What concessions has it discussed? What has changed in its negotiating position as a result of the survey? Educators have been told none of this.

The resolution merely states that there is “no revised pay and conditions offer from the Allan Labor Government.” But a “revised offer” is not necessarily a fundamentally different agreement. It could mean the same basic deal, with limited modifications designed to secure a different vote.

The agreement rejected by educators would have locked in further real pay cuts and failed to resolve crushing workloads, chronic staff shortages or the broader crisis in public education. For ES staff, among the lowest-paid workers in schools, the deal was even worse, with a one-off allowance substituting for a genuine permanent wage increase.

The danger of another sellout is not hypothetical. The July 14 resolution does not recommit the AEU leadership to its own log of claims or set any minimum demands on wages, workloads or conditions that must be met before a new agreement is recommended. Nor does it provide for any rank-and-file oversight of negotiations.

The resolution also marks a shift in the AEU bureaucracy’s campaign. It places emphasis on the Allan government’s failure to sign a federal school funding agreement, which has deprived Victorian public schools of at least \$2.4 billion.

The chronic underfunding of public education is inseparable from the crisis of staffing, workloads and conditions. But the \$2.4 billion funding secretly shelved by the government was not the central issue in the AEU’s campaign for the agreement that educators rejected. This shifts attention away from the rejected agreement and the AEU’s role in attempting to impose it, while creating the conditions for a possible funding announcement or minor concessions to be presented as a “victory.”

The fight for billions of dollars to fully fund public education is indispensable. But it cannot be used to obscure the demands of educators that are inseparable from the fight for wage increases and genuine workload reductions.

Above all, educators must go on the offensive by turning to other sections of workers entering into struggle against the same Labor government.

On June 29, more than 2,000 Victorian public hospital doctors voted overwhelmingly to begin the process for protected industrial action—the first by the state’s public hospital doctors in more than two decades. At the same time, more than 13,000 allied health workers continue industrial action over wages, staffing and workloads.

These are not separate struggles. They arise from the same assault by the Allan Labor government: years of real wage cuts,

chronic understaffing, intolerable workloads and the systematic degradation of essential public services. The objective conditions exist for a powerful unified movement of tens of thousands of educators, doctors, allied health professionals and other public sector workers.

It is precisely such a movement that the trade union bureaucracies fear and work to prevent. Each section of workers is kept isolated within separate enterprise bargaining negotiations, while union officials return repeatedly to closed-door talks with the same Labor government responsible for the crisis.

There is no objective reason for health workers and educators to remain separate. Joint action would enormously strengthen both groups and open the way for a far broader mobilisation across the public sector. But such a movement will not be organised from above by the union apparatuses. It must be developed from below by workers themselves.

The historic “no” vote demonstrated that educators can defeat the dictates of the union bureaucracy when they act independently. The survey has demonstrated that opposition is broadening and that educators are prepared to wage a sustained struggle.

The answer is not to wait for the AEU apparatus to determine the next step. The formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of and opposed to the bureaucracy, must begin in workplaces, regions and across the state to democratically formulate demands and determine the course of both political and industrial action.

The July 23 strike must be made the starting point for this development—a unified, rank-and-file-controlled movement for substantial wage increases, reduced workloads, full staffing and the billions of dollars required to fully fund public education, health and all essential social services.



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