

AEU-Labor government trying to ram through sell-out of Victorian educators: Vote no! Form rank-and-file committees!

Committee for Public Education
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In a completely anti-democratic operation, the Australian Education Union (AEU) bureaucracy and the Victorian state Labor government are trying to ram through essentially the same sell-out enterprise agreement (EA) that Victorian teachers and education support staff overwhelmingly rejected in June.

After days of backroom negotiations between the AEU and the Labor government, the two sprang into action in a tandem operation directed against teachers. On Thursday morning, the education department emailed all staff the details of a “revised” offer.

In reality, it is nearly identical to the previous deal, containing the same provisions for real wage cuts and doing nothing whatsoever to address unbearable workloads and other onerous conditions that amount to a crisis of the public schools and are driving teachers out of the profession.

The AEU convened an extraordinary meeting of its state council on Friday, after which it announced a sudden vote by union members on the offer. The ballot opened on Friday night and concludes on Tuesday at 1 p.m.

To describe that as a mockery of a democratic process would be an understatement. The AEU is trying to stampede educators into accepting a sellout without even the pretence of an opportunity to critically examine its contents, let alone discuss or debate them. The ballot has been timed, moreover, to give the AEU the opportunity to cancel the planned July 23 statewide strike, which it only called in the first place as a manoeuvre to regain control of the dispute amid widespread anger.

Just as cynical as its haste is the AEU’s profession of neutrality. It has only stopped short of openly endorsing the agreement, for fear of another mass repudiation of the union leadership, as occurred in the June ballot. In fact, sources have indicated that at the AEU state council meeting on Friday, senior union leaders expressed open support for the latest sellout. Their decision not to openly call for a “yes” vote, while doing everything possible to ensure one, is therefore yet another fraud perpetrated by the union bureaucracy against educators.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), a rank-and-file educators’ network, calls on teachers and educators to repudiate the government-AEU conspiracy against their rights, including by voting “no” in the union’s rushed ballot.

But that is only the first step. Time and time again, the AEU has

demonstrated that it is a government police force, whose role is to impose cuts to teachers’ pay and conditions in the interests of austerity and big business. The more teachers have expressed their opposition, the more sordid and anti-democratic the AEU’s actions have become, from outright censorship of critical teachers to hectoring demands and misinformation, presenting regressive EAs as a “victory.”

The AEU bureaucracy cannot be pressured; it must be fought as an implacable opponent of educators’ interests. That means teachers and education support staff, whether they are union or non union members, forming rank-and-file committees that they control, to take ownership of the dispute from the union leadership, formulate demands based on what educators and schools require and to plan industrial and political action outside the AEU straightjacket.

The reason the AEU and the government are trying to rush acceptance of the agreement is because of how similar it is to the one that union members voted down by almost 58 percent in June.

The changes to pay are cosmetic, with the headline pay offer identical, an increase of 28–32 percent over four years. Under the revised offer, ES staff would receive the percentage increase over four years, but it is the same inadequate figure as for teachers, and that under conditions where most ES employees are paid far less. The meagre character of the concession was indicated in the education department email, which claimed that ES staff would be paid an additional \$560 a month.

The entire wage offer is scarcely above forecasts of inflation, which is already resurging and could soar further under conditions of the criminal US-led war against Iran that has fully resumed over recent weeks.

This miserable wage offer, moreover, has been advanced after the last AEU sellout in 2022 locked teachers into pay increases of less than 2 percent per annum, amid the height of the cost-of-living crisis.

There is also a 1 percent annual lump sum payment for classroom teachers at the top of the pay scale, but that is dependent on “successful progression outcomes,” making it a step towards performance pay.

The central issue facing teachers, workload, is unaddressed. This was the driving force behind the rejection of the original agreement. Teachers and ES staff made clear that the current

workload is unsustainable. Teachers are routinely working 50 to 60 hours a week. Critical tasks—planning, assessment, reporting—are pushed into evenings, weekends, and holidays.

Yet the revised agreement does virtually nothing to change this. There is a reduction of one meeting per week, but the main drivers of workload remain. Class sizes are unchanged. This is critical. Every additional student increases planning, marking, reporting, communication, and behavioural management demands.

Educators made clear that real workload reduction requires enforceable class size limits. That has been ignored. Face-to-face teaching time is also unchanged. Victorian teachers already spend among the highest proportions of their working week in front of classes in the country. More teaching hours mean less time for preparation and assessment during the working day—and more unpaid work outside of it.

The agreement provides for up to four hours of additional time in connection with Disability Inclusion processes, but it remains unclear which teachers or Education Support staff will receive this time, under what circumstances it will be allocated, how often it will be available, or how schools already facing severe staff shortages will make it possible to release staff.

Even if the entitlement were available to every eligible educator, four hours is a pittance compared with the workload generated by Disability Inclusion. Teachers and ES staff spend countless hours preparing documentation, attending Student Support Group meetings, developing Individual Education Plans, consulting with specialists and families, implementing adjustments and responding to increasingly complex behavioural, medical and learning needs.

The inadequacy of this provision is thrown into even sharper relief by broader government policy. Over the coming years, thousands of children and young people under 18 are expected to lose access to National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) supports. The inevitable consequence will be increased pressure on public schools, which will be expected to absorb greater responsibility for students with complex disabilities and additional needs without the funding, staffing or specialist resources required.

The assault on the NDIS, being carried out by the federal Labor government, underscores the reality that the attempts of the AEU bureaucracy and the state Labor government to inflict yet another sellout on Victorian educators are part of a far broader austerity offensive.

The aim of governments, acting on behalf of a corporate ruling elite, is to force workers to pay for state deficits, while protecting the profits of big business and to gauge money from essential social services, so that it can be allocated to the military amid an eruption of imperialist war that Australia is centrally involved in.

There is growing opposition in the working class, reflected in struggles that are currently underway by doctors and allied health staff in Victoria, nurses in South Australia and other sections. Everywhere, workers are coming up against the reality that the fight for their basic rights, to decent pay and conditions, requires a political struggle against the union bureaucracy and Labor.

The significance of the “no” vote in June was that it marked a new development of this necessary rebellion against Labor and the bureaucracy. But the “no” vote was only the beginning, and the AEU is desperately seeking to reverse even that through its current

rushed ballot.

Teachers must draw the necessary lessons of the experiences through which they have passed, and take a stand on behalf of their own pay and conditions, the right of their students to high-quality public education and the needs of the working class as a whole.

The CFPE urges teachers not only to vote no, but to contact us today to discuss forming a rank-and-file committee at your school! New organisations of struggle are required to defeat this sellout and to take the struggle forward. That struggle must be based on what educators and schools need, not what big business governments and their mouthpieces in the union bureaucracy say is “affordable.” As a starting point, the CFPE has advanced the following:

- An immediate 40 percent wage increase to recover years of real wage losses, with salaries indexed to inflation through automatic cost-of-living adjustments.
- Maximum class sizes of 15–20 students to improve both learning conditions and educator workload.
- A minimum of eight hours each week of guaranteed in-school planning, assessment and collaboration time, together with substantial reductions in face-to-face teaching.
- The hiring of thousands of additional teachers and Education Support staff, including at least one full-time ES staff member for every class, to end chronic understaffing and excessive workloads.
- Fully funded support for students with disabilities and additional needs, including psychologists and specialist support staff in every school.
- Billions of dollars redirected away from the military expansion into public education, ending public subsidies for elite private schools and guaranteeing every child access to a high-quality public education.



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