

Australian pseudo-left seeking to head off rebellion against union bureaucracy by Victorian teachers

Committee for Public Education
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The failure of the Victorian Labor government and the Australian Education Union (AEU) bureaucracy to force through a sellout enterprise agreement (EA) on the state's public school teachers and education support (ES) staff is creating a crisis for both of them.

Pseudo-left organisations, including the "Fight the Crisis" group led by Solidarity and "Socialists in Schools", an arm of Socialist Alternative, are desperately manoeuvring to dissipate, disorient and divert the opposition of teachers and to head off a political struggle by them against Labor and the AEU leadership.

In a rushed AEU ballot that concluded on July 21, a majority of teachers and ES staff who are union members voted down a proposed EA that would have locked in stagnant or declining real wages amid resurging inflation and done nothing at all to address unbearable workloads. The agreement they rejected was a slightly rejigged version of a deal that teachers voted down on June 19, the first time in over 40 years that a union-endorsed EA was repudiated by the state's educators.

On July 23, having failed to bulldoze the sellout through, the AEU was compelled to proceed with the second 24-hour strike by teachers this year.

Five days later, Labor Premier Jacinta Allan was forced to resign and was replaced by her deputy Ben Carroll, amid frustrations in the corporate elite over the failure to end the teachers' struggle and broader demands for stepped-up austerity amid the state's substantial deficit.

Those events have underscored the extent to which a developing crisis of Labor, at the state and federal level, and of its aligned union apparatus, is being driven by the reentry of the working class into struggle. South Australian nurses last week voted down a sellout agreement pushed by the union there, with Victorian health workers and doctors set to strike, increasingly exposing the strain of the old union mechanisms through which the dictates of governments and big business are imposed.

Under those conditions, the critical issue for Victorian teachers and other sections of the working class is how to take forward their struggle.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, has throughout the teachers' dispute raised the need for teachers to carry their nascent rebellion against the AEU bureaucracy through to the end.

What is required are new organisations of struggle, a network of rank-and-file committees in every school, through which teachers can take the struggle into their own hands, defeat the isolation imposed by

the AEU and prepare a genuine industrial and political struggle against the big-business Labor government that the union bureaucracy defends.

The CFPE's warnings that the AEU apparatus cannot be pressured have been confirmed by its determination to ram through a sellout, even after the government offer has been overwhelmingly voted down now twice by educators.

It is vital, however, for educators and other workers to understand that the AEU does not act alone but is propped up by so-called left organisations who posture as opponents while in fact diverting opposition to the government's offer back under the framework of the union leaders.

These pseudo-left organisations are seeking to head off a rebellion against the AEU and to peddle the fraud that it can be pressured to shift course. While bemoaning the sellout efforts of the union leadership and calling for a "no" vote in the past two ballots, their efforts have been directed at ensuring that educators remain trapped within the framework wholly controlled by the AEU bureaucracy. They have sought to cover this over with pseudo-militant posturing centred on calls for strikes.

In the wake of the latest rejection of the sellout by teachers on July 21, Fight the Crisis, a front group of the Solidarity organisation, began calling for a strike on August 4. In its social media posts, Fight the Crisis suggested that this could be wildcat action and even began crowdsourcing a strike fund. It claimed that educators at as many as 40 schools had endorsed such a stoppage.

That proved to be false. In reality, Fight the Crisis appeared to be counting all schools that had passed oppositional motions calling for more stoppages leading up to the July 23rd strike, something quite distinct from an explicit endorsement of an August 4 wildcat strike.

By floating wildcat action in vague terms and grossly inflating the number of schools potentially involved, Fight the Crisis was creating the conditions where militant teachers could be singled out and victimised both by the education authorities and the AEU leadership, for taking unprotected action in violation of draconian industrial laws contained in Labor and the unions' Fair Work legislation, a threat already conveyed by Justin Mullaly in a letter to AEU members.

The cynicism and essential unseriousness of the call by Fight the Crisis was exposed at an AEU Melbourne Inner City regional meeting on Wednesday night.

Its representatives put forward a motion, calling for the Labor government to "make a satisfactory offer that builds on the gains of the in-principle agreement." That is, Fight the Crisis was seeking to

confine teachers to feckless appeals to the very government that is seeking to impose a regressive deal on them. And it presented the most recent version of that sellout, the “in-principle agreement” between the AEU and Labor that teachers rejected, as having contained unspecified “gains.”

The additional demands advanced by Fight the Crisis were both meagre and rubbery. They called for a 35 percent pay rise over three years back dated to January 2026. That is identical to the AEU's original claim and is far less than is required to make up for past pay cuts, including those contained in the last 2022 sellout.

Teachers have repeatedly stated that even more important than pay are the increasingly unbearable conditions they face, including soaring workloads that amount to unpaid overtime and ballooning class sizes. The Fight the Crisis motion paid lip service to these sentiments, but its demands were deliberately vague. It called for “staged class size reductions” and a “staged reduction in face-to-face teaching time,” but said nothing about the levels that both should be reduced to, or over what period.

The vague and limited demands were a bone to the AEU bureaucracy and the Labor government itself, providing both with the opportunity to again rejig the sellout deal, this time with hazy commitments to improve conditions, but without any concrete obligations.

The motion called for an August 4 strike, which would proceed if the Labor government did not provide a “satisfactory offer” the very next day. That was the same light-minded call for wildcat action that Fight the Crisis had previously been advancing. But, at the same time, the motion called for the AEU's state council meeting on Friday to sanction the stoppage. The function of those demands, a hazy “wildcat” strike ultimately requiring the sanction of the AEU bureaucracy, was to create maximum confusion and to put on a militant face, while still directing teachers back behind the AEU leadership.

The other pseudo-left grouping, Socialists in Schools, opposed the motion, but it did so on right-wing grounds.

Socialists in Schools declared their opposition to unprotected action and asserted that there was insufficient support for strikes outside the control of the AEU. That was essentially an acceptance of the Fair Work industrial relations regime, which bans most strikes except those called by union bureaucracies during bargaining periods, and has been used to force through one sellout after another. And they insisted on the need for total “unity,” which in practice means subordination to the AEU leadership.

The reference to August 4 was removed from the motion, which subsequently passed.

On Friday, the AEU state council appealed to Labor for a new deal and threatened strike action on August 19 if it was not forthcoming before then. That is aimed at providing Labor and the AEU bureaucracy itself time to cobble together a new sellout, under conditions where the Labor government is being reoriented in an even more pro-business direction following the ouster of Premier Allan.

Notwithstanding their dispute at the AEU regional meeting and subsequent acrimonious social media exchanges, both Fight the Crisis and Socialists in Schools have called instead for strike action to be called for August 11 with a prospect of further stoppages.

In other words, their differences with each other, and the bureaucracy itself, have substantially revolved around the date on which to call a single-day strike.

For all the manoeuvring though, both pseudo-left outfits share a

basic perspective.

Teachers must limit themselves to appeals to the AEU bureaucracy, as it continues to try to sell them out, and to the big-business Labor government itself. Whatever criticisms they may have of the AEU apparatus, both uphold it as the sole legitimate leadership of educators, notwithstanding its role in attacking their pay and conditions. They cover up the reality that the AEU bureaucracy effectively functions as a dictatorship, with rank-and-file educators deprived of any channels through which to oppose its dictates.

The pseudo-left groups function as a “loyal opposition,” serving to deflect anger and politically neuter it into safe channels, reflecting their own aspirations to be integrated into the bureaucracy itself.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) is advancing a diametrically opposed perspective. It is calling on teachers to take matters into their own hands and is bluntly warning that unless they do, a sellout will ultimately be imposed. The “no” votes have been an important starting point, but passive opposition is not enough.

Teachers and ES staff must begin organising independently, uniting union and non-union workers in rank-and-file committees, completely independent of and opposed to the AEU bureaucracy. To spearhead that fight, the CFPE last month initiated a statewide Victorian Educators Rank-and-File Committee.

Through a network of such committees in all the schools, teachers could share information, engage in democratic discussion, formulate demands based on what they and public schools need, not what Labor and the unions deem to be “affordable,” and plan an industrial and political fight against the Labor government and the sellout. Such committees can fight to unify their struggles with those of health workers, public sector workers and other sections that all confront the same assault on jobs, wages and conditions.

Completely connected to the need to organise independently is the necessity for teachers to actively consider a new political perspective. The assault on their wages and conditions is one expression of a wholesale austerity offensive, being implemented above all by Labor and the unions, amid a crisis of Australian and global capitalism. This agenda is not about minor improvements to pay and conditions, but an attempt to return social conditions for broad masses of the working class to those that existed in the 1930s, including to pay for skyrocketing military expenditure amid an eruption of war globally.

The alternative is the fight for a workers' government and for socialism. The banks and the corporations must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control and the massive fortunes of the billionaires expropriated. Those resources must be redirected to social services, to ensure high-quality public education, healthcare and other necessities for all, and decent pay and conditions for all workers.



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