

Australian Education Union pushing new sellout of Victorian teachers after anti-democratic conference

Committee for Public Education
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The Australian Education Union (AEU) suddenly announced a new ballot of Victorian teachers and education staff (ES) yesterday afternoon, on a revised enterprise agreement (EA) offer from the state Labor government.

The AEU is yet again trying to stampede educators into accepting a sellout, with the vote having opened immediately, before teachers had an opportunity to scrutinise the agreement, and closing next Monday morning.

The rush is because the deal is substantially the same as has already twice been rejected by educators. It still provides for real compound wage increases of only 6.7 to 7 percent per year, under conditions of resurging inflation, which could rapidly exceed that level. That would lock in a real reduction in teachers' wages, after the last AEU-Labor 2022 agreement imposed pay "rises" of less than 2 percent at the height of the cost-of-living crisis.

To try to sweeten the sellout, the Labor government has promised a \$2,000 sign-on bonus if the EA is ratified.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) will provide a fuller analysis of the new agreement. But it is clear that this is a sellout and should be rejected by all educators. Not only will the deal do nothing to resolve financial hardship amid the cost-of-living crisis, but it will also go nowhere to resolving the fundamental issue of unbearable conditions, including soaring workloads and ballooning class sizes.

The latest attempt to rush an agreement is part of a protracted operation by the AEU to suppress opposition from educators. This dispute has been marked by a rebellion of educators against the AEU, including the first rejection of a union-endorsed EA in more than forty years in June, and another majority "no" vote to a repackaged sellout operation the following month. Educators have also held two mass strikes, the first such stoppages since 2013.

In the wake of that latter vote, the AEU held its state conference, supposedly the highest decision-making body of the union, on August 1. It was an anti-democratic farce at which any discussion of the dispute was suppressed.

In the course of the conference, the AEU's Victorian president Justin Mullaly repeatedly ruled any attempt by delegates to discuss the dispute as being "out of order." Mullaly insisted that "the conference agenda is set in accordance with our rules" and "by the Branch Council." Discussion of the agreement was "not on the agenda" and was not a matter requiring "urgent" consideration.

Despite protests, Mullaly simply moved to the next item. Delegates were not even permitted to vote on whether the agreement should be discussed.

That is of a piece with the anti-democratic methods the AEU leadership has employed throughout the dispute, including censorship of discussion on union social media, tightly controlled briefing meetings that excluded alternative resolutions and amendments, and the rushed second ballot.

The attempts to raise the dispute were made by the "Socialists in Schools" group. Notwithstanding its name, it is a pseudo-left outfit. While calling for a "no" vote in the sellout ballots, it has functioned as a "loyal" opposition to the AEU leadership. Its criticisms are framed as friendly suggestions to the bureaucracy combined with an insistence that educators cannot take any action independently of it.

The fact that the AEU leadership would not allow discussion even from its de facto allies in "Socialists in Schools" underscores what a sclerotic apparatus it is. That itself refutes the claim by "Socialists in Schools" that this bureaucracy can be pressured to end its collaboration in government attacks on teachers.

Refusing to discuss the central issue facing teachers, the dispute that is underway, Mullaly sought to fill the void with claims that union membership had grown substantially. This was an attempt to present the AEU leadership as enjoying support, despite the votes against its sellouts.

Mullaly celebrated the fact that membership is approaching 65,000 and claimed that 19,500 had been recruited in six months.

There is a material basis to that celebration. Nearly 9,000

members resigned following the 2022 sellout agreement, contributing to a \$2.16 million decline in subscription revenue in 2023. AEU officials earn salaries exceeding \$250,000 a year—more than twice teachers’ wages and four times those of ES workers—making membership revenue central to sustaining the apparatus and its privileges.

The growth in membership cannot, however, be equated with support for the bureaucracy. Under draconian industrial legislation, supported by the bureaucracy, only union members can participate in protected industrial action.

Thousands rejoined the union to participate in the March 24 strike, the first statewide strike in 13 years, while many more joined amid the campaign and the two “No” votes on agreements pushed by the leadership. The fact that many of these new members voted against the leadership’s agreements exposes the gulf between membership growth and support for the bureaucracy.

Moreover, the aim of the AEU leadership is not to mobilise its membership to fight for the interests of teachers, but to suppress such a struggle. The mobilisation that was outlined at the conference was a campaign for the reelection of Labor in the November state election.

Mullaly declared that “a hell of a lot is at stake” and that educators “must exercise our collective capacity” against One Nation, which he described as “a disaster for workers and public education.”

The call for Labor’s reelection was made explicit by Victorian Trades Hall Council President Luke Hilakari, who devoted his 25-minute address entirely to the election. His slogan was, “Keep the Liberals out and fight One Nation.” He called for phone-banking, door-knocking, polling-booth work and other election activities, while referring to Labor’s “narrow pathway” back to government.

The election pitch was breathtaking in its cynicism. Educators were being told not only to vote for but to campaign for a party that is spearheading a massive attack on their pay, conditions and on public education. Federally, Labor has overseen the gutting of public education funding for decades, while in Victoria, Labor has been in office for 22 of the last 26 years, during which the conditions in schools have continuously deteriorated.

None of the speakers referenced Labor’s new Victorian leader Ben Carroll. Installed just days before the conference began, he has vowed to deepen an austerity offensive, which means further cuts to education, health and other vital social services. That is a continuation of Labor’s broader assault on the working class, including its plan to demolish all 44 public housing towers in Melbourne, in the interests of the property developers, the sacking of 1,000 public servants and an anti-democratic assault on popular hostility to the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

In addition to being promoted by sections of the ruling elite, One Nation has been able to pick up on anti-establishment discontent, precisely because of how right-wing Labor has become. Hilakari and Mullaly, while warning of the “dangers” presented by One Nation, were silent on the extent to which Labor and One Nation agree. Both attack immigrants and refugees, scapegoating them for the social crisis; both back predatory US-led wars globally, and both are committed to making the working class pay through cuts to social spending and to wages.

The reality is that Labor is a party of big business and the banks. The union bureaucracies, including the AEU, are their enforcers.

The conference demonstrated the futility of appealing to this bureaucracy to change course. It confirmed what the Committee for Public Education has insisted, that teachers need to take control of their dispute out of the hands of the AEU leadership entirely.

The CFPE has called for independent rank-and-file committees in every school, democratically controlled by teachers and ES workers, union and non-union alike. Such committees can break the isolation imposed by the AEU, share information, formulate demands based on educators’ needs and unite the struggle with other sections of workers confronting attacks on wages and conditions.

The Victorian Educators Rank-and-File Committee, established last month, is a concrete step in this direction.

This is inseparable from a political struggle against Labor and the entire capitalist political establishment, which is committed to a program of austerity and war amid a crisis of global capitalism. The need for a socialist perspective, which rejects the subordination of education and other social needs to profit, is objectively posed by the situation itself.

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