

Australia: Teachers speak out against union sellout in Victoria

Our reporters
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From September 3, Victorian public school educators will vote in an all staff ballot on a four-year sellout agreement struck between the state Labor government and the Australian Education Union that inflicts another real wage cut and does nothing to address the crisis produced by years of underfunding, staff shortages and intolerable workloads.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the Victorian Educators Rank and File Committee are calling for a No vote on the deal, which is essentially a repackaged version of one that had previously been twice rejected by majorities of AEU members after two one-day statewide stoppages that won wide public support, including from parents and students.

The ballot follows an unenthusiastic Yes vote by 79 percent of AEU members. This was the result of the AEU deliberately isolating and wearing down teachers and education support staff, combined with a scare campaign about the prospect of an even worse outcome imposed by the Fair Work Commission or a Liberal-One Nation state government.

While offering a \$2,000 sign-on bonus as a bribe, the promised pay rises of 28 to 32 percent over four years amount to a further real wage cut under conditions of soaring mortgage payments, rents and prices, fuelled by the criminal Albanese government-backed US war on Iran.

The Labor governments, the AEU bureaucrats and their apologists are exploiting fears of a far-right government taking office in Victoria after the November state elections as a means of trying to politically bludgeon educators into submission. But the appalling conditions in the schools must be laid at the feet of Labor, which has been in office in Victoria for 23 of the past 27 years.

Labor's record, both state and federal, of attacks on the living and working conditions of the working class, is intensifying, and is now about to worsen with the gutting of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), which will dump thousands more children with learning difficulties into the public schools. At the same time the Albanese government is pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into preparations to join more US-led wars.

It is that record, which is generating immense social discontent, that is threatening to open the door to an even more right-wing administration. That poses the necessity for

educators to reject this AEU-government compact and reach out to all the other sections of workers who are fighting similar attacks for a unified struggle against Labor's program of war and austerity.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to educators across Melbourne about why they voted No in the third ballot of union members, their assessment of the AEU, and the path forward.

Steve, a secondary mathematics and science teacher with 16 years of experience, pointed to the gap between the AEU's original log of claims and what it ultimately delivered. "The AEU originally was looking at 35 percent over three years, capped class sizes, reduction in meeting times, less face-to-face teaching time. None of this was remotely achieved in any of the new proposed agreements. The money is only one small part of it. The administration work is what needs to reduce."

Steve described the ongoing workload already associated with the Disability Inclusion Profile (DIP) process. "Each term I complete approximately 23 Individual Education Plans... In addition to that, I spend several hours each week modifying lesson content, assessments and classroom resources to meet students' needs and keep a record of this. In a term I would probably spend around 60-plus hours on this alone. This is time separate from planning lessons, marking, meetings and normal teaching duties."

Steve commented on the AEU's anti-democratic methods. He experienced censorship on the union's social media, saying "comments are disabled when it does not fall in line with the union's agenda of pushing deals."

Steve identified the political scare campaign as decisive in swinging votes. "Teachers whom I have spoken to voted yes because of the \$2,000 and the fear of the Fair Work Commission, the Liberal and the One Nation Party. It was a scare campaign from the AEU which worked."

Jarrod, a secondary music teacher from the southeastern suburbs, said: "Members indicated to me that they were tired and fearful with the upcoming caretaker government." He also noted the "union's censorship of critical voices on social media."

Jarrod added that he had no faith in the government's promise of future "fair funding": "I think the potential for full funding is great, however given it's separate to the agreement I

don't trust the government that it will be implemented."

In a vague promise, Premier Ben Carroll said Victoria would finally fulfil the state's funding obligations to public schools under the Gonski plan by reinstating the \$2.4 billion secretly cut from the education budget in 2024. Even if that promise were kept, the experience of educators in every state is that the Gonski funds have failed to address significant under-funding, staff shortages and workloads.

One teacher in the northern suburbs who had voted no twice previously switched to yes, describing himself and others as "unenthusiastic yes voters" driven by a "combination of the officials clearly not being up for a real fight, fear around the state election outcome, cost of living making it hard to strike, and straight up fatigue."

Lily, a primary school teacher with more than 20 years of experience in Melbourne's northern suburbs, commented: "There have been some very minor improvements, but the fundamentals remain largely the same. There is still no meaningful reduction in class sizes, and the administrative burden continues to grow."

Lily explained: "I've been teaching for more than 20 years and the job has become increasingly unsustainable. Class size affects almost everything we do—planning, assessment, reporting, behaviour management, parent communication and, most importantly, how much individual attention we can actually give our students."

The third version of the agreement contains no enforceable class-size caps. It reproduces the framework of the last AEU sellout in 2022, citing "planning guidance" rather than binding limits, while preserving a principal's "ultimate administrative and operational responsibility."

Lily pointed to the work involved in the DIP application process to illustrate how administrative burdens are being intensified rather than addressed. "One DIP can take more than 30 hours," she said, referring to the preparation of a disability profile alone. "If we genuinely wanted to address workload, we would be looking at removing unnecessary administrative work from teachers and ES staff rather than giving us a few hours to complete it."

While the agreement says that schools must "recognise the time required" for DIP participation in long-term planning it specifies neither a number of hours nor a guaranteed release entitlement and contains no requirement for replacement staff or dedicated funding.

Lily commented: "I think some people voted yes because a lot of people have simply lost faith that the AEU will fight for anything substantially better." She explained the necessity to establish rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions.

"Critical voices should be heard, particularly when members are being asked to give up their bargaining leverage for another four years. Attempts to shut down or marginalise opposition only make me less confident that members are being given a

genuine opportunity to debate what is actually in front of us.

"I have watched the AEU closely for around 15 years, so unfortunately none of this has particularly surprised me. I don't believe the problem is simply that we need to put more pressure on the union leadership or convince them to fight harder. Their record speaks for itself. Agreement after agreement has seen our working conditions deteriorate while outcomes that fall well short of what staff originally fought for are presented as victories."

Lily concluded: "For me, this dispute has reinforced why school staff need independent rank-and-file organisation. We need a structure through which teachers and education support staff can communicate and organise independently. It means ordinary school staff having somewhere to discuss what is actually happening in our workplaces, share information between schools and decide collectively what we are prepared to fight for.

"Regardless of the result of this ballot, I think that work needs to continue. If the agreement is rejected, we need to organise for a serious campaign rather than simply waiting for the next slightly altered offer. If it passes, the need for rank-and-file organisation doesn't disappear. If anything, it becomes even more important. We will still be living with large classes, excessive workload, administrative burden and an education system that is increasingly difficult for both staff and students."

The Victorian Educators Rank-and-File Committee, established at a CFPE-convened meeting on July 19, will seek to unite educators with other sections of the working class confronting similar attacks—health workers, council staff, early childhood educators. It will advance a program based on the actual needs of teachers, ES staff and students, not the dictates of the corporate ruling class and its governments.

The resources for world-class public education systems exist. They are being diverted into military expansion, elite private schools and corporate profits. The fight for decent wages and conditions is inseparable from the broader political struggle for a socialist perspective.

To discuss these issues and for assistance in forming rank-and-file committees, contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact