How the AEU is attempting to push through a sell-out of Victorian teachers

By Susan Allan
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The Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU) is attempting to pressure teachers into voting “Yes” for its latest Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) with the state Labor government. It is using a series of anti-democratic and bureaucratic measures to silence considerable, but, at this point, unorganised opposition among teachers and education support (ES) staff.

After 12 months of closed-door discussions with the Victorian Labor government, the AEU has signed off on an in-principle agreement on teachers’ salaries and working conditions. The deal was finalised without even the pretext of consultation with union members and announced just days before the term break.

AEU president Meredith Peace has declared that its agreement with the Labor government is a “victory.” She has asserted that it addresses the “crushing workload” on teachers and provides “secure employment” for teachers and ES staff. A critique of the EBA undertaken by teachers who belong to the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), and which was published by the World Socialist Web Site, demonstrates that it does neither. Moreover, the agreement imposes a real wage cut and sanctions stepped-up surveillance of teacher “performance” based on their students’ results in standardised testing (see: “Australian teachers’ agreement: The reality behind union ‘victory’ claims”).

The proposed EBA is entirely in line with the AEU’s role as the enforcer of the national performance-ranking based assault that is underway on public education across the country—an assault paralleled and even further advanced in countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States. The federal government, whether headed by Labor or the Coalition, and with the collaboration with the state governments, is seeking to slash public education costs and accelerate the growth of private, fee-paying schools.

Teachers and education support staff need to ask the following questions:

· Why was the EBA endorsed by the AEU just days before teachers were set to vote for protected industrial action, and on the eve of the term holiday break?
· Why have no mass meetings been called, where those “for” or “against” the agreement can have their views heard?
· Why are teachers not being provided with sufficient time to read and discuss the agreement in their local school union branches before they elect their delegates to attend meetings where a vote on the EBA will be taken?
· Why are the comments of teachers who are presenting opposition to the agreement on the AEU Facebook page, which is virtually the only “official” means available, being blocked and deleted?

When teachers return to school this week, they will have just nine working days to call a meeting of their local branch and elect representatives for delegate meetings that begin on May 1. Branch meetings will have to be held before or after school, under conditions where teachers are working on average 53 hours per week and are mandated to attend at least two to three hours of other after-school meetings. Many ES staff who work part-time will be unable to attend, restricting their right to express their opinions.

This process follows a well-worn path of anti-democratic and bureaucratic measures by the union leadership over many decades.

The delegates’ meetings consist of nine meetings in the metropolitan centre of Melbourne and 21 in country and regional centres. Local branches can elect one delegate per 20 union members, or part thereof. The delegate meetings therefore objectively water down the view of union members at schools where efforts have been made to fully discuss the agreement and where there is strong opposition.

In the 2008 and 2012-13 EBA negotiations, some local branches did not even call meetings to elect their delegates. Local incumbent representatives of the union simply appointed themselves.

In the past, delegates meetings have been bureaucratically-managed, allowing maximum time for the
union leadership to speak in support of the agreement, and
minimal time afforded to opposition. This process was
opposed in 2013 by members of the SEP, who suspended
standing orders and restricted the time of the union officials
to dominate meetings.

Delegates voted via a secret ballot but had to identify their
name and school on the ballot paper. This requirement is
intended to intimidate teachers.

After two weeks of delegates meetings, the union will
announce the result of the vote—which is counted by the
union leadership, not an independent body. This is followed
by a government-imposed secret ballot of all employees of
the Department of Education, which includes both union and
non-union members.

In December, last year the same anti-democratic tactics
were utilised by the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF)—an affiliate of the AEU in the state of New South
Wales—when it rammed through a new salaries and
conditions agreement in a one-hour meeting. With teachers
having no opportunity to read the agreement, the union
handed them its own five-point “summary,” and expected
them to vote on it in hundreds of separate meetings spread
across the state.

Like their counterparts in Victoria, the bureaucrats in
NSW claimed the deal contained no erosion of conditions. In fact, the NSWTF had already signed off on the
reintroduction of inspectors and agreed to the introduction of
a new $\text{Bump It Up}$ program, aimed at intensified NAPLAN
testing of Year 9 students (see: “New South Wales
government ‘bumps up’ standardised testing in schools”).

There is a clear relationship between the anti-democratic
measures of the AEU apparatus and the regressive content
of the agreement.

The AEU has served as the crucial mechanism enabling
the imposition of a retrogressive educational agenda that
was introduced under the Rudd/Gillard Labor government
and which is still falsely presented as “educational reform.”
The “reforms” include NAPLAN (National Assessment
Program—Literacy and Numeracy) standardised testing, My
School public ranking web site, school “autonomy”, teacher
performance reviews tied to school improvement and
NAPLAN-derived student data (see: “Australian
government seizes on NAPLAN test scores to justify budget
cuts”). All opposition by teachers has been bureaucratically
suppressed.

The objective of education “reform,” as it is in the UK,
New Zealand and the US, is to entrench a two-class system
that consists of low-cost, poorly-resourced public schools
alongside elite “selective” schools and an ever-expanding
fee-paying private sector.

The beneficiaries are the corporations and the wealthy,
which reap the tax reductions financed by cutbacks to public
education spending. Working class youth are being
condemned to a second-class education and a future of
low-paid, insecure, casual work.

Teachers need to draw sharp lessons and lead the fight for
social equality. It is critical that graduates, younger teachers,
and ES staff review the historical record of the AEU and
previous struggles. The AEU’s endorsement of this
agreement is not an aberration. It is part of the modus
operandi of the AEU and all unions, in alliance with
government, to insist that workers bow down to the interests
of corporate profit.

This situation poses the need for the development of
independent initiative by teachers outside the framework of
the AEU.

At every school, teachers should elect a rank-and-file
committee that is committed to the defence of teaching
conditions and public education.

Teachers and ES staff should circulate oppositional
critiques of the agreement and convene local meetings, at a
time when as many staff can attend, to discuss its content
and elect delegates.

Resolutions should be moved that the delegates’ meetings
demand that a vote on the EBA should not be held until after
mass meetings that are open to all teachers, both union and
non-union members, and where equal time is provided for
both supporters and opponents to present their case.

There must be a rebellion against the AEU and a clear
“No” vote to this reactionary agreement. A “No” vote,
however, can clearly only be the beginning of a political
struggle to reverse the assault on public education and all
other social gains of the working class.

The aim must be the establishment of a workers’
government that will place the banks and major corporations
into public ownership and ensure that society’s resources
are used to meet social needs, including free high-quality
education for all and decent pay and conditions for staff, not
to accumulate profit and wealth for a minority.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

http://www.wsws.org