

Teachers' union moves to shut down industrial campaign

By Frank Gaglioti and Will Marshall
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The Australian Education Union (AEU) has moved to shut down a 14-month industrial campaign by Victorian teachers against the state Labor government of Premier John Brumby. Under the terms of a proposed three-year agreement announced by the union and the government on May 5, the teachers' central demands—which included a 30 percent salary increase, a maximum of 20 students per class, and a significant increase in full-time positions to reduce the number of contract teachers—have been dropped. In return, teachers will receive a pay rise that barely keeps pace with inflation.

The sell-out has been met with an extraordinary barrage of publicity from the media, the AEU, and the state government.

Education Minister Bronwyn Pike said the agreement meant that “Victoria can continue to build its excellent education system and continue to attract the best and brightest into the teaching profession”. AEU Victorian President Mary Bluett publicly kissed Premier Brumby as she hailed the agreement as the best deal for teachers' union members in more than fifty years. She later telephoned Liberal opposition leader Ted Ballieu to thank him for his support. An AAP report was typical of the media coverage: “After months of tough talking, the state government caved in and gave teachers the pay rise they had been after for more than a year”.

What a fraud! Victorian teachers have long been the lowest paid in the country and have worked in the most under-funded state system. The 30 percent pay claim, taken together with the other central demands on class sizes and contract teaching, would have only gone some way towards improving the situation. The AEU, however, has capitulated to the state government on the basis that achieving salary parity with teachers in New South Wales is sufficient—as if the Victorian teachers' NSW counterparts were not also underpaid and overworked.

The full terms of the proposed agreement have not yet been released. Under the announced measures, senior teachers will go from earning \$65,414 a year to \$75,500, a 15 percent increase, while first year teachers will receive an initial 11 percent increase from \$46,127 a year to \$51,184. A one-off bonus of \$1,000 for “most teachers” and \$2,000 for principals is also included in the package. Unlike in previous agreements, pay rises will not be backdated to the start of the dispute. Instead they take effect from May 11—that is, before the union's members have had the opportunity to vote on the deal. The AEU clearly wants to present it as a foregone conclusion and suppress any discussion or debate. The union's refusal to release the full terms of the agreement only underscores its contempt for its own membership.

Throughout the dispute, the Brumby government has insisted it would not offer more than a 3.25 percent pay

rise without corresponding “productivity” commitments. Education Minister Bronwyn Pike said the announced agreement was consistent with this position—a claim that appears to be confirmed by the government's failure to include any provision for further salary expenditure in its annual budget, which was released shortly before the teachers' agreement was finalised.

The AEU has not revealed what pay rises have been offered to those who are not first year teachers or senior staff. According to an ABC article, teachers will receive on average a 4.9 percent rise in the first year and 2.7 percent per cent in the following years. With senior staff receiving 15 percent and first year teachers 11 percent, this can only mean that everyone else's salaries will only be marginally higher. In other words, for many teachers, perhaps the majority, the proposed agreement amounts to a real wage cut. The official inflation rate is now more than 4 percent, while prices of many essential items—including housing, fuel, food, and child care—have risen far more sharply.

The AEU-brokered agreement also includes significant concessions on so-called productivity. According to the government, high school teachers will work an extra 10 minutes a day, the “equivalent of six more days' tuition for secondary school students”. Three pupil free days will be replaced with three “state-wide planning and professional development days” to occur before the start of the student school year.

Most significantly, the teachers' union has used the pay dispute to entrench itself as the enforcer of the government's new “education blueprint” which further develops its ongoing assault on public education. Successive Liberal and Labor Victorian governments have cut public spending over the past two and a half decades, leaving the state with the lowest investment and expenditure per student in the country. Now public schools are being forced to compete against one another supposedly in order to become “more competitive”. Under the “blueprint”, schools will be pressured to comply with a host of “performance benchmarks”, with students continually tested to produce “league tables” of narrowly-assessed academic results. These tables will become the basis for schools to compete for enrolments. Such a “marketplace” will ensure that the better-off and more established schools benefit at the expense of those in working class and disadvantaged areas.

At the same time, the deal sets aside \$10.5 million to help principals provide an exit strategy for so-called “disengaged teachers.” This will give principals financial resources to encourage a quiet and undisruptive “exit” of “underperforming” and “disengaged teachers”, further encouraging a climate of fear and intimidation that has been developing for years.

The new pay agreement also accepts the ongoing use of contract teachers, who now make up 20 percent of the

total school workforce. Teachers had demanded a drastic reduction in the exploitation of contract labour and extension of permanent positions, but the AEU has instead settled for “improvements in the contract system of employment to maximise the number of ongoing employees and to provide greater financial security for teachers employed on contracts”. While the details are yet to be released, no teacher should trust this undertaking. The AEU has long accommodated itself to the government’s promotion of contract teachers, with the last industrial agreement including union recognition that “some fixed term or casual employment will continue to be necessary”.

Rudd put on notice

Despite the teachers’ meagre pay offer, sections of big business have expressed concern that the proposed agreement goes too far and may lead to other sections of the working class pressing for wage increases to keep pace with escalating inflation.

The *Australian’s* editorial on Wednesday warned: “A flow-on of the Victorian teacher pay decision would have grave implications for inflation... Labor has said it is wedded to productivity trade-offs for higher wage increases. But the extra 10 minutes of classroom time promised by Victorian teachers seems a very low benchmark.” The Murdoch newspaper went on to express its concern that the Rudd Labor government might “lose control of the industrial relations agenda that it exploited so effectively to win office”.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is again being put on notice. Having won the backing of decisive sections of the ruling elite in last November’s federal election after pledging to advance a new wave of pro-business economic reform, he is now being told, in no uncertain terms, that he must be prepared to ruthlessly suppress workers’ wage claims.

The Labor government has made clear that it intends to deliver. No less than three senior government ministers—workplace relations minister and Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard, Treasurer Wayne Swan and finance minister Lindsay Tanner—insisted that the Victorian teachers’ agreement would not lead to wage rises in other sectors. Gillard declared that under Labor’s industrial relations system, “wage agreements struck for one entity, whether it be teachers in Victoria or whether it be someone working in a mine here, can’t flow through to other enterprises”.

While the government, media, and the AEU continue to hail the agreement as a major victory, many ordinary teachers have expressed their anger over the sell-out. Determined to force the government to meet their demands, teachers participated in two strike-day mass meetings in November last year and conducted a series of four-hour stoppages across Victoria in February. Union members at Lilydale High School have now issued an open letter to Mary Bluett expressing their opposition to the new pay scales and indicating that the entire branch is opposed to the proposed settlement.

Several teachers gave voice to their disgust in letters to the *Age* published two days after the announcement. “Despite Mary Bluett’s unbecoming cries of triumph, teacher salaries are still below the level required to access the high-quality end of the employment market,” Russell T. Edwards wrote. “Monday’s deal takes Victorian teachers less than a third of the way towards matching the wage growth that has occurred in the Australian economy overall in the past three decades.” John Kerley observed: “John Brumby must be laughing all the way to the bank at having conned teachers into accepting an average 3.25 percent a year rise over the next four years, when inflation is 4.3 percent. Even more amazing is the report that they have also accepted an increase of nearly five percent of teaching loads. That means that, in four years’ time they will be, in real terms, nearly ten percent worse off than they are now.”

The AEU council is set to vote on the agreement on May 12, with a ballot of teachers to take place after this. The Socialist Equality Party insists that teachers must vote “no”. But rejecting the proposed deal can only mark the first step in what must be developed into a broader industrial and political campaign, not only of teachers but of parents, students and all working people in defence of decent pay and conditions and for a fully funded and universally accessible public education system.

Such a campaign can only be developed to the extent that teachers make a conscious break with the AEU and its craven support for the pro-market agenda of the state and federal Labor governments. Only a socialist strategy can advance the independent interests of teachers and orient them to the development of a political movement of the entire working class against ever-increasing hardship and deepening social inequality. We encourage teachers to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party to develop a discussion on these critical issues.

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