Australia: Labor makes cynical promise on public education in Victorian election

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For empty promises and cheap electioneering, the Labor Party's ploy on public education in the Victorian state election campaign plumbs new depths.

After seven years in power Premier Steve Bracks decided that public education will be his government's "number one priority" if returned to office. He has just noticed that public schools are in a shambles and is promising to renovate them.

The pledge was the top item in the party's campaign launch last week. Labor grandly announced: "Every Victorian government school will have been rebuilt or modernised within 10 years under Labor's plan for the state's biggest-ever school building program."

As always, such promises have to be taken with a large grain of salt. It should be noted, first of all, that nothing was said about restoring staffing levels, reopening closed schools or providing additional funding for much-needed specialist services.

Moreover, rebuilding over 10 years limits the amount of money that will be spent immediately. Bracks can make such a promise knowing full well that his government is unlikely to last a decade. Even in the improbable event that the pledge were fulfilled, some students starting school this year would have to put up with dilapidated school facilities until they reach Year Ten.

Bracks has promised $1.2 billion over the next four years to modernise more than 350 schools and complete regeneration projects. By 2016, he plans to have renovated the state's 1,200 schools at a total cost of $2.3 billion—that is, an average of just $2 million each.

Some estimates, however, put the cost of modernising the public school system as high as $20 billion.

According to the Council for Education Facility Planners International, consisting of architects, engineers and builders, the public school system in Victoria is in such a state of disrepair that half the schools should be demolished.

Properly maintained buildings are a basic necessity for decent education. Yet such is the rundown of public education under Labor and Liberal governments alike that "school modernisation" features as a major item in the election campaign. Workers, apparently, should be grateful that Labor is promising a 10-year plan to upgrade school facilities for their children.

Even then there is a catch. Changes to the school maintenance auditing process mean that not all costs are covered by government funds. At Pinewood Primary School, for instance, the education department deemed this year that the art room, school kitchen and shelter sheds were not covered by maintenance funds. So the school was left to find the money from its own budget.

Increasingly parents are being forced to pay for "free" public education. Last year parents paid more than $168 million in fees to send their children to government schools—a 43 percent increase since 2000. Inevitably, schools in working class areas have the greatest difficulty raising money and thus are least able to cover the gaps in their budgets.

This is part of a national trend. At the federal level, funding is grossly biased toward the elite schools, while government schools are left struggling, many in squalid conditions.

A final warning is needed on Labor's plans to revitalise state education. In 2005, Bracks suddenly announced a "Capital Investment and Access Planning Policy" that requires schools applying for capital works to first submit their plans for improving student results. Once again, schools in working class areas, which often have to deal with a range of difficult social and learning

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problems, will be disadvantaged.

A recent report by the Australian Education Union (AEU) highlighted some of the conditions in Victorian public schools.

Almost 90 percent of the 330 state schools surveyed in 26 electorates had unsatisfactory classrooms and facilities. Urgent maintenance was required in 75 percent of the schools while half lacked suitable permanent classrooms. Conditions were so bad in four electorates that a number of school buildings were infested with termites.

In Doncaster in Melbourne's east, according to the AEU report, students wore coats due to the lack of heating. Students in the outer eastern suburbs of Forest Hill and Mount Waverley were forced to use portable toilets, which were particularly offensive on warmer days.

In Broadmeadows, the electorate of State Treasurer John Brumby, the Campmeadows Primary School is known as one of the most poorly maintained schools in the state. The list of problems includes burst cold water pipes, unstable classrooms, an unreliable electricity supply, leaking roofs and poor heating. While presiding over the decay of public education and other essential services, Brumby has funnelled billions of dollars into business via subsidies and tax concessions.

The gutting of public education has resulted in more families sending their children to private schools. Official statistics reveal enrolment in public secondary schools fell from 69 to 60 percent of the total over the past two decades. The proportion for state primary schools dropped from 72 to 69 percent.Each fall in public sector enrolment results in another cut in funding for state schools, leading to a further deterioration in conditions. It is a vicious downward cycle.

In this election, Bracks has again run a scare campaign, referring to the record of the previous Liberal government of Jeff Kennett in shutting hundreds of public schools and destroying thousands of teaching jobs. But Labor's promise to reverse these cutbacks remains unfulfilled to this day.

* Nearly one fifth of the teaching workforce still operates on short-term contracts introduced by Kennett in 1993. These teachers are in an invidious situation: forced to repeatedly apply for their jobs. Many contracts last a year but can be as short as one month.

* Labor promised to lower class sizes in primary schools. However, Access Economics audited Labor's budget and found that Labor's figures only allowed for an average, not a maximum, of 21 students in a class. Bracks simply changed the wording of his pledge to refer to average class sizes. In secondary schools, the reduction has been miniscule, from 22.7 to 21.9.

* Bracks promised to undo the previous rationalisation of the state school system in which 350 schools were closed. But, in seven years, the government has opened just 33 new schools. In Broadmeadows, the Labor government is carrying out a substantial new rationalisation. In all, seven of the fourteen existing schools will be closed.

High quality education to allow all children to develop their potential is a right, not a privilege and should be freely available to all. Public schools, particularly those in working class suburbs like Broadmeadows, need a massive infusion of billions of dollars, not only to upgrade facilities, but to provide up-to-date computer and audio visual equipment and proper staffing levels, including the employment of specialist teachers to meet particular learning needs.

The Socialist Equality Party is standing in the election to fight for socialist policies that put the social needs of the majority above the private profit of a few, in every sphere of life.

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