

Australia: Details of the proposed AEU-Victorian government sell-out teachers' agreement

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24 May 2008

The Socialist Equality Party has called for Victorian teachers to vote against the sell-out industrial agreement negotiated by the Australian Education Union and the state Labor government, and for the convening of mass meetings to review and discuss the proposed deal. So far most teachers are not aware of the details. Yet the agreement excludes all their key demands—including a 30 percent pay rise, a significant reduction in the number of contract teachers, and for smaller class sizes—while at the same time ratcheting up the government's ongoing attack on public education.

One brief clause buried in the document goes to the heart of what is ultimately at stake. Clause 2 of Section 9 states that, "The parties bound to the agreement are committed to the following: System reform as articulated in the Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform that will lead to an improvement in the educational opportunities and outcomes for all young Victorians".

Not a word of explanation can be found in the proposed agreement, or in related union documents, regarding what "system reform" under the "Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform" actually involves. An examination of the text of the "Blueprint", however, makes clear that it has nothing to do with developing the "educational opportunities of the state's public school students or the rights and conditions of their teachers.

The first "Blueprint" was unveiled by the state government in 2003, and was formally endorsed by the teachers' union in 2004 as part of the last three-year industrial agreement. The central thrust of the document was to tie school funding to continuous improvements in student test results. This requirement has increasingly forced teachers to focus on preparing their students for standardised testing—then dissecting the data and ranking the students—rather than on developing their talents, capacities, and aptitude to learn.

The "Blueprint" deliberately has pitted schools against one

another. Under the cynical banner of "school regeneration", it has targeted those branded as "underperforming" in a fresh round of closures. A number of schools, invariably the poorest, have been told that the only way they can access extra funding is to amalgamate.

Most "underperforming" schools are located in working class areas in Melbourne's northern and western suburbs, and in Springvale-Dandenong in the east. They are grossly under-funded and tend to have many students from homes suffering from poverty, unemployment, and the myriad related social problems. Only a massive injection of public funds—targeting not only the students' complex educational needs but also the wider issues of basic social infrastructure, recreational facilities, and local jobs—can begin to address the educational outcomes of these schools.

The "Blueprint" is designed to remove any responsibility from the state government to provide extra funding to schools in working class and deprived areas. When the state Labor government publicly launched the second version of the document on April 10, the assembled education bureaucrats were addressed by Sir Michael Barber, the architect of former prime minister Tony Blair's education reforms, via video link from Britain. "The first lesson is that just spending money—and more and more of it—doesn't work," he declared.

Many of the Victorian reforms have been directly taken from those introduced by Blair, which included statutory annual tests for children at all ages and so-called "Performance Management" as a means of remunerating teachers according to test results. British Labour also brought in classroom assistants, who were supposed to help teachers with various menial and bureaucratic tasks but are now widely used as casual replacements and stand-ins—roles for which they have no qualifications or experience. The proposed Victorian agreement introduces this retrograde category of "teachers' assistants" which, as in Britain, will create a new form of contract and casual employment,

undermining teachers' wages and conditions.

The second version of the Victorian "Blueprint" goes even further than the first. Victorian Premier Brumby's agenda is now tied to the Rudd federal Labor government's National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). National standardised testing will now establish so called "league tables", where schools will be publicly ranked according to their test results. Principals and teachers who are deemed to have failed in meeting arbitrary benchmarks will be earmarked for removal and their schools for closure.

The proposed industrial agreement openly facilitates this agenda. Under Section 14, a new category of teacher—"executive class"—that has never before been discussed—is introduced: "The objective of the introduction of the executive class in the Victorian Teacher Service is to attract talented and high performing principals into the areas of need by taking on major roles such as mentoring principals and turning around under performing schools."

In other words, principals of schools labelled "underperforming" can be forced out and replaced with new "executive principals". While such schools will be provided with no additional funding for teachers or educational resources, the new principals on "executive contracts" will be awarded annual salaries of up to \$200,000 a year.

Endorsing the government's measure, AEU Victorian President Mary Bluett declared: "It will obviously be a career opportunity for the individual principals, but what it's really doing is meeting the needs of the system". How revealing! What Bluett means by "the needs of the system" is not the physical, intellectual and emotional development of the state's public school students, but the Labor government's finances. At the same time as the union is trying to force ordinary teachers to accept a real wage cut, new principals on lucrative "executive contracts" will be parachuted into the worst-off schools to more ruthlessly enforce the government's testing agenda. One can only imagine the impact on school morale.

The new category of principal creates a dual precedent that will undoubtedly affect all teachers. Firstly, the new principals' stated role is to ensure that "performance benchmarks" are met. Bonuses will be paid for meeting set targets, marking the first introduction of effective performance pay in Victorian public schools. Secondly, by allowing the sidelining of principals deemed "underperforming", the proposed union agreement lays the basis for tying teachers' job security to students' test results.

The AEU and the state government have already agreed to what will mark the first stage in this process—\$10.5 million in public funding set aside to pay off so-called "disengaged" teachers. A climate of intimidation will be further developed

in which opponents of the government's agenda will be branded "disengaged" and forced out. The union bureaucracy has even claimed this as a victory for teachers, on the grounds that the sacked teachers will be replaced by contract teachers!

The Socialist Equality Party's May 20 statement, "Demand mass meetings to reject Victorian teachers' union sell-out!", declared: "At every stage of the campaign, the union has fought to keep its membership isolated and in the dark and to stifle genuine discussion and debate. This situation can no longer be tolerated. Union branch meetings should be held at every school and resolutions passed rejecting the agreement and demanding that the union convene a mass meeting. According to the AEU constitution, a general meeting can be called if 10 percent of the membership petitions the leadership. Branches should circulate their resolutions and coordinate their activities throughout the state, and involve parents, principals, administrative education staff, as well as broader layers of the working class. Agitation for a mass meeting should mark the first step in taking the conduct of this campaign out of the hands of the AEU bureaucracy, electing rank and file committees and beginning a coordinated industrial and political struggle against the entire public education agenda of the state and federal Labor governments."

That key areas of the proposed union deal—including the entire agenda developed within the "Blueprint"—have never been explained to teachers or publicly discussed underscores the need to convene a series of mass meetings. The SEP again urges the rejection of the industrial agreement and the development of a far broader campaign in defence of public education and against the pro-business, productivity-based agenda of the state and federal Labor governments and the unions.



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