

Australia: Demand mass meetings to reject Victorian teachers' union sell-out!

The Socialist Equality Party
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Victorian teachers should reject the sell-out agreement negotiated by the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the state Labor government of Premier John Brumby, and fight to mobilise teachers, parents, and the working class as a whole in defence of teachers' wages and conditions and the public education system itself. As a first step, teachers should demand that mass meetings be convened where the details of the proposed agreement can be properly discussed, ordinary teachers can have their say, and a democratic vote be held.

Details of the proposed agreement—released after the AEU State Council voted on May 14 to accept the government's terms—make clear that the union is attempting to ram through a new industrial contract that abandons all the demands raised by teachers in the course of their year-long struggle. Two strike-day mass meetings were held in November and February and a series of four-hour stoppages staged across the state in recent months to insist on a 30 percent pay rise over three years, maximum class size of 20 students, and a significant shift away from the use of contract teachers towards permanent positions. The AEU now expects teachers to accept an agreement that amounts to a real wage cut for many, exacerbates job insecurity and compounds the deepening crisis in the schools' primary and secondary classrooms.

When news of the deal was first released on May 5—more than a week before teachers had any chance to read the full terms—AEU Victorian President Mary Bluett hailed it as a major victory. But there should be no misunderstanding. If ratified, this AEU-Labor government agreement will open the way for further severe attacks on public education.

* First-year and senior teachers' salaries will rise by 11 and 15 percent respectively but this will be offset by "increases" in the next two years which will be well under the inflation rate. Many teachers on the middle pay rates will receive 4.9 percent for the first year, and just 2.71 for the next two—amounting to a real wage cut. Claims by Bluett that Victorian teachers will earn more than their NSW counterparts are false. Anyone between their first and thirteenth year will earn significantly less.

* Class sizes do not even rate a mention. This agreement adopts the same framework as the last one—it stipulates no maximum class size, simply an average figure for both primary and secondary schools. Maximum hours of face-to-face teaching are limited to 22.5 in primaries and 20 in secondaries—the same as currently—but with a new curriculum and reporting procedures and with the option of an additional after-school meeting hour—up from two to three—as well as parent nights, planning and correction time and report writing, creating an ever-increasing workload.

* On contract teachers: Like the 2004 enterprise agreement, this one accepts that "some fixed term or casual employment will continue to be necessary". Already 20 percent of teachers have no job security; these generally young teachers are forced to constantly reapply for their positions.

* One particularly sinister measure is the AEU's agreement with government plans to force out "disengaged" teachers and replace them

with former contract teachers. This is being presented as a victory for contract teachers. The reality is that instead of fighting the growing casualisation of the teaching profession, the AEU will help enforce sackings and the destruction of permanent jobs. Among other consequences, this will result in an even worse climate of intimidation and fear. Teachers will be forced to toe the government line on education and teaching practices under threat of being labelled "underperforming" or "disengaged" and replaced by contract labour.

* A new category of employee, "teacher assistant", has been introduced which is entirely unexplained. Its most likely aim is to bring in more contract labour. In Britain, the Labour government now employs "teacher assistants", who lack experience and qualifications, to cover growing shortages of permanent teaching staff.

The fact that many teachers have never heard of these provisions simply underscores the need for mass meetings and a genuine discussion. But the AEU is proceeding in precisely the opposite manner, doing its utmost to spread confusion, conceal the real terms of the deal, and intimidate and bully members into accepting it. No mass email has been sent out, and it is difficult to find any details on the AEU's website.

The first stage of ratification is to take place through a delegates' vote involving no more than 5 percent of the union membership. The delegates' meetings—of which only four are scheduled for the Melbourne metropolitan area—have been deliberately scheduled on school days in the afternoon in an attempt to prevent ordinary teachers from attending. The union hopes to ram through the agreement at these meetings, after which a ballot of all teachers will reportedly be held in each school in the last two weeks of June.

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.

How has the current situation emerged?

Despite the AEU's endorsement of the government's offer, opposition

and anger among the rank and file is growing. Several union branches have either rejected the deal or expressed their deep concern to the leadership. The Victorian Principals Association reportedly met last week and rejected the agreement out of hand.

But the fight to defend wages and conditions can only be sustained and developed to the extent that it is based on an entirely opposed political perspective to that of the unions and the Labor government: one that starts, not with accommodating to the demands of the financial markets and big business, but with the intellectual and creative needs of the state's young people and the right of all teachers to a secure, well-paid job, with decent conditions in fully resourced schools and classrooms.

It is important to note that the AEU-Brumby agreement did not fall from the sky. Rather, it represents the culmination of a bipartisan 25-year assault on public education by Liberal and Labor governments alike.

Since 1983, under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, education "reform" has become a key component of the drive to make Australian capitalism "internationally competitive". The various state governments have functioned as critical components of this agenda, promoting private schools at the expense of the public education system and implementing massive cuts to jobs, schools and resources. Throughout this process, the teacher unions have played a central role.

In the late 1980s, the Victorian unions collaborated with Joan Kirner's state Labor government to introduce "District Provision", which was used to "rationalise" state education. Under the banner of providing "greater curriculum choice", dozens of schools were closed or amalgamated.

From 1992, Jeff Kennett's Liberal government accelerated Kirner's program through "Quality Provision," which delivered a massive \$350 million cut to the education budget, closed 350 schools and destroyed 9,000 teachers' jobs. The union left individual schools to fight on their own, isolating teachers and parents who undertook school occupations and community actions. Kennett also introduced the "Schools of the Future" program, under which schools became autonomous, effectively ending centralised employment. To silence political opposition, Kennett introduced Teaching Service Order (TSO) 140 and used it mercilessly to victimise and sack teachers. The unions refused to mount any challenge, insisting that their members comply. And when contract teaching was introduced in 1993 the union failed to even call a members' meeting! It simply proposed moving from a state to a federal award—to preserve its role as key negotiator against Kennett's attempts to sideline it.

Labor was returned to office in 1999 after promising to reverse Kennett's attacks on public education, end contract teaching, and lift gag provisions under TSO 140. Not one of these promises was kept. Instead, Kennett's program, based on dividing schools and pitting them against each other, has been intensified, along with contract teaching.

Now Labor has moved to introduce so-called merit based pay. A 2001 industrial agreement signed with the AEU initiated the link between performance criteria and pay increments. This pro-market shift was further entrenched in the 2004 contract, when the AEU explicitly signed up to the government's education "blueprint", forcing schools to demonstrate continuous improvement in student test results in order to access continued funding. It will continue under this agreement.

A new perspective needed

The fight to defend their interests and public education as a whole brings Victorian teachers into conflict, not only with the AEU and the Brumby state government, but also with the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

Rudd won office last November by appealing to the Hawke-Keating

"legacy" and pledging to launch a new wave of free market economic reforms. Under conditions of an escalating crisis in the world economy and growing fears of a 1930s-style global recession, he has already made crystal clear that his government will ruthlessly place the full burden of the economic crisis on the backs of working people and suppress any struggles over wages and conditions.

Federal Labor's so-called "education revolution" is aimed at pushing up productivity. Every aspect of public education, from pre-school to university, is to be subordinated to the labour requirements of business. The Victorian government's "Blueprint" will be complemented by the Rudd government's national student tests, which will be used to establish league tables—yet another measure aimed at slashing public school funding.

Teachers cannot advance their interests on the basis of a trade unionist perspective. The viability of the old trade unionist and Laborist strategy of securing concessions for the working class from the national ruling elite has been forever shattered by the ever closer integration of the world economy. An immense social reversion is underway, with governments in every advanced capitalist country moving to slash workers' wages and conditions, tear up existing social security and welfare provisions, and extend the operations of the profit system to every sphere of social and economic life.

Workers require a new and independent political orientation, one which aims to harness the enormous productive capacities and technological resources of the world economy in the interests of the social needs of the vast majority, rather than the narrow interests of the wealthy few. On public education for example, billions of dollars should be spent to ensure a free, universally accessible, quality school system—including child care and kindergartens for all—which gives all children the opportunity to fully develop their talents, capacities, and interests. Such a program, however, is fundamentally incompatible with an education system subordinated to the market and the dictates of big business. Nothing less than the revolutionary reorganisation of society is needed. The prerequisite for this transformation is for teachers—and all workers—to make a decisive break with the Labor Party and the trade unions and to turn to the development of a new party which genuinely represents their interests.

The Socialist Equality Party is that party. We urge all teachers, parents and students to study our program and history, to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* to discuss these critical issues and to advance the struggle for a broad campaign in the working class against the AEU sell-out agreement.



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