Australia: Escalating hostility among Victorian teachers to government-union deal

Our reporters
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Opposition among Victorian school teachers is rapidly escalating as details of the proposed industrial agreement negotiated by the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the state Labor government become more widely understood. A broad discussion is emerging, through emails, the internet, letters to the major newspapers, and school union branch resolutions registering teachers' hostility to both the government of Premier John Brumby and the AEU.

The deal, which was initially announced on May 5, but only made available to teachers on May 14, was initially hailed by the media, the government, and the union as a major victory for Victoria's teachers. An examination of the yet-to-be-ratified agreement, however, makes clear that none of the central demands raised by teachers in the course of their year-long campaign—including a 30 percent pay rise over 3 years, maximum class sizes of 20, and a significant shift away from contract teaching to permanent positions—have been met. Instead, most teachers face a real wage cut and the further undermining of public education through the government's right-wing "Blueprint". (See "Details of the proposed AEU-Victorian government sell-out teachers' agreement")

Many of the emails being circulated around the schools have focussed on the issue of teachers' salaries. Earlier this year, the union announced it was dropping its 30 percent pay claim in favour of parity with New South Wales rates. This represented a major capitulation—NSW teachers, like those throughout the country, are grossly underpaid, and forced to work in under-resourced schools. Nevertheless, the union has failed to deliver even on this scaled-back target.

In one email, titled "Spin v Reality", Brent Houghton, a third-year teacher from Lilydale High School, noted that under the agreement, some Victorian teachers will be more than $12,000 or 16 percent worse off in 2008 than their NSW counterparts. He contrasted this with AEU Victorian President Mary Bluett's statement when the deal was first announced: "I am delighted and relieved—we have gone from being the lowest paid teachers in the country to the highest".

The email also counterposed the "spin" of Bluett's claim that, "It's a complex arrangement, but the least any teacher is going to get out of this is somewhere between five and six percent per annum", with the reality that many teachers will receive little more than the government's initial pay offer of an annual 3.25 percent increase. Under the union agreement, those at the top of the "Leading Teacher" scale, for example, receive $11 *per year* (i.e., less than $1 per month) more than what they would have done under the government's proposed 3.25 percent. Houghton notes: "In 2011, the most experienced Leading Teachers will be paid 21 cents a week more than the government had originally offered. That's an improvement of half a cent per working hour!"

Much of the teachers' anger has been directed against the union for issuing confusing and misleading information that deliberately conceals the true situation. Pay tables published on the AEU website appeared to claim as a new pay rise salary increases that would have happened anyway as teachers moved up the pay scale each year.

Justin Mahoney, one of the 2,700 members of the group "Better Pay for Victorian Teachers" on the social networking web site Facebook, compared the union's presentation of the new pay scales with the actual figures listed in the proposed agreement. "Why are there two documents?" he asked. "Why is our own union selling us a deal which is absolutely unacceptable? The union executive is a sham—the membership at school has already called for them to explain themselves but they are ignoring the validity of what we are saying."

In the same forum, Natalie Baker added: "I am completely dubious about this deal. It is so 'complicated' that it makes no sense and it's hard to understand what it is really about... How hard is it to put out a table with four columns, 'Your Wage 2008', 'Your Wage 2009', 'Your Wage 2010', 'Your Wage 2011', so that we can compare where we are now against where we will be in the future? I will not be voting on this agreement in its current state and presentation."

On May 20, clearly under pressure, the AEU issued a new document defending the deal on its web site's "frequently asked questions", as well as a reply to Brent Houghton's "Spin v Reality" email. The FAQ amounted to little more than a rehash of the bureaucracy's distortions and evasions. None of Houghton's facts were challenged—instead the union insisted it had never promised to secure anything more! "At no time has the AEU said that every teacher would be paid the same as teachers in NSW," the union stated. "The media quote assumes that Mary Bluett was quoted correctly [when she said that Victorian teachers were now the highest paid in the country] and, depending on how you interpret it, it is true that Victorian teachers at the top of the scale will be paid the highest salary in Australia."

The union also denied that anyone faced a real wage cut, citing Victorian Treasury inflation estimates of 3 percent inflation this year and less than 3 percent from 2009 to 2011. This argument underscores the social gulf that separates the privileged AEU bureaucracy from ordinary teachers. Teachers, along with the rest of the working class in Australia, have faced escalating costs of living for housing, groceries, fuel, and other necessities, which have all far exceeded the official inflation rate. With rising interest rates, a deepening rental crisis in Melbourne, and petrol prices tipped to rise as high as $2 a litre later this year, there is no doubt that many Victorian teachers will see their real wages significantly eroded under the AEU-backed agreement.

The reality was inadvertently confirmed by the federal Labor government's finance minister Lindsay Tanner in an interview with the *Business Spectator* web site on May 17. Asked whether the teachers' agreement could "spill over" to other sections of the working class, potentially fuelling inflation, he replied: "I'm not sure that [these concerns] are justified, because I note that the Victorian increase is a bit more complex than it's been portrayed and there are sections of the teaching fraternity that have been jumping up and down saying they're being betrayed and so forth. Often with these things you get dual presentations. You get one presentation for general public consumption,

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which is ‘we’re being really nice to teachers’, and then you get particular teachers or the teachers’ union jumping up and down and saying ‘look what a great victory we’ve just won’ and then elsewhere you’ve got the fine print which shows that it’s slightly more sober and less dramatic than a simple glance suggests.”

Tanner’s extraordinary remark reveals just how conscious the Labor governments of both Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Premier Brumby are—working hand in hand with the AEU in attempting to con the teachers. While the “presentation for general public consumption”—for teachers and working people as a whole—involves claims of some major victory, the reality—which is well understood by the Labor Party, big business, and the union bureaucracy—is that the new agreement undermines teachers’ wages and public education as a whole.

As the Socialist Equality Party’s May 20 statement, “Demand mass meetings to reject Victorian teachers’ union sell-out!”, noted: “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.”

“The corporatisation of education”

Teachers’ hostility to the proposed deal has by no means been confined to the question of pay. The union’s abject capitulation on class sizes and contract teachers—who now make up 20 percent of the total workforce—has generated significant opposition. There is also discussion about the introduction of new categories of teachers, such as “teachers’ assistants” and “executive principals”, new mechanisms to sack existing teachers, on the basis that they have become “disengaged”, and the incorporation of an updated version of the state government-AEU “Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform” into the agreement. These issues were stressed by teachers who recently spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*.

“There is not enough debate of the broader issues—not just wages, but the constant pressure,” Hilary, an art teacher who works as a casual emergency teacher, told the WSWS. “The ‘Blueprint’s’ introduction of ‘continuous improvement’ means a juggernaut involving ridiculous pressure on teachers. How are teachers to keep ‘improving’? Surely there is an endgame? All it means is continuous stress. Young teachers are not encouraged to consider what education is for in a general sense. My friend had a ghastly experience of the contract circuit. For five years she was on contracts for three months at a time. It is horrendous, you barely get to know the kids’ names or where the rooms are. All the time you are busting yourself to get a foot in the door.

“What does the Labor government mean by ‘underperforming’ schools? I have been an emergency teacher in Dandenong, which has a large Sudanese community, where I was working with a Year One class. There was literally only one pencil per student and one kid had no pencil, so I couldn’t get him to write. I was appalled. It was so tight—all these little people learning to write—and there weren’t enough grey lead pencils! That’s all they had. How could you force the staff to work harder under these conditions?

“This category of ‘assistant teachers’ is not good. I worked in central London about five years ago, and they were used there a lot. In secondary schools they would work with a single student with a disability. In primary schools they were cutting and pasting—menial jobs to supposedly save the teacher’s time. But I think it was covering up the shortage of trained teachers. In London the shortage was rife, they were using lots of emergency teachers, and about 50 percent of the staff was on short-term contracts. These assistants provided some continuity, they knew the class, so that when an emergency teacher came, an assistant could help. But there is always supposed to be a four-year trained teacher in front of the class—sooner or later there would be no teacher for an hour or so, and the assistant could be pressured to bridge the gap.

“As for Rudd’s education revolution—is it always a Labor government when there is an inflationary cycle? The Liberals are definitely imploding, because they are not in power. I don’t think there is any difference between the [former] Howard government and the Rudd government—an ongoing agenda is beginning to emerge. You can see that a confrontation is looming. If the agreement was as great as the union says it is, then why would they be so worried about holding a mass meeting?”

Paul Spencer, an English teacher with ten years experience who now teaches at Braybrook Secondary College, told the WSWS: “I see this as the corporatisation of education. Even the terminology, such as ‘executive class,’ is oriented to business. I’m concerned at how they make the decision that someone is ‘disengaged’. The assistant teachers are a cost-cutting exercise—an assistant is a diminished teacher.

“Teachers at my school are very angry. We have had some big turn-outs at union meetings. Then the AEU leadership got wind that we were discussing the agreement with other schools. [AEU Vice President Brian] Henderson came to our school to hose this all down. Most of the teachers did not accept what he said and wanted to pass no confidence motions. Their main complaint was the lack of consultation and failure to publish the material. We were also really frustrated that our ordinary increments were included in the union’s presentation of the agreement to make it seem we were getting a pay rise.”

David Gordon—whose teaching career spans several decades and who now works at Dandenong High School—said: “With this agreement the union tried the same sort of methods they always use. They announced the agreement through the media, put a positive spin on it, nobody would be left out, there would be a pay rise. We were being kept deliberately in the dark. When we started receiving emails about the agreement, people were really keen to read them, and they helped to accelerate an atmosphere of scepticism. All sorts of people at school were asking me what did it really mean? Young teachers were ambushed, they were confused. They don’t know who’s got any authority to make an assessment.

“Conversations around the school were about the credibility of the AEU executive, a suspicion that they were not representing us properly. It became apparent there was no improvement to teaching conditions. They were asking: ‘Have we still got the same as in the old agreement?’ Through that agreement we’d seen the slow erosion of conditions. Everyone believes—a number having worked overseas and seen it—that teaching assistants will be what people call half-price teachers, child minders. When we go into team teaching, an assistant will replace teacher absences.

“As for so-called ‘disengaged teachers’, no one is openly talking about that. Who is a disengaged teacher? It will be those who are willing to make criticisms on any issue. Executive principals? Will this be a way to close down underperforming schools? This is another attack in line with the basic philosophy of privatisation—to reduce the number of parents willing to send their kids to the local public school.

“There are confrontations coming. Teachers are becoming more conscious. They are realising that this is them being attacked. Now sidestepping the issue is no longer possible. They have to start seeing things from a different perspective. That’s why people are starting to read the WSWS. That’s what we have to do—get more information out. There is a vacuum and people are looking.”

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