

Two letters and a reply on the teachers' dispute in Victoria, Australia

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Below are two letters received by the World Socialist Web Site in response to our coverage of the Victorian teachers' dispute, and a reply by Victorian teacher and Socialist Equality Party member, Frank Gaglioti.

See: "Victorian teachers' union opposes mass meetings to discuss industrial agreement", "Victorian teachers' union convenes delegates' meetings to ram through industrial agreement", "Escalating hostility among Victorian teachers to government-union deal", "Demand mass meetings to reject Victorian teachers' union sell-out!"

Good Afternoon!

I have just had to stop myself swaeing [sic] about the crap I have just read in an article called "Demand mass meetings to reject Victorian teachers' union sell-out".

You people need to get your heads out of the sand and look at the figures. There isn't one teacher who isn't going to get a pay rise out of this agreement. The graduates, as they should be, are going to earn the best graduate salary in the nation. How does that mean they will be earning less when they have jumped up \$5k a year? Someone needs to check their caluculator [sic] at wsws.org!

I am a teacher on the classification A2. I am happy that the AEU has focused on the graduates and senior teachers. Teachers need to be enticed into the system and encouraged to stay. Why would you bother to stay in the system if the pay wasn't any good further down the line?

Finally, the views of whoever wrote this article are not the views of the majority of teachers and it reminds me of the garbage I had to listen to at my region's ratification meeting last night. I had to listen to Ollie from Dandenong Secondary college tell me that the Union I represent is "defunct, and the executive is defunct". I would love to see someone like Ollie negotiate with the government - Lord knows how long it would take to come to any sort of agreement after a series of mass meetings and mass debates (pardon the pun) all the time losing the support of parents and the public. If you are not happy with the leadership, don't be a member Ollie!

I will enjoy my coming pay rise and I am sure that Ollie and others who typed this disgraceful article won't say no to a little extra cash!

AC

Please explain how the Blueprint can be described as 'right-wing'. An ideology-based, conformist structure such as the Blueprint appears to be a typical 'left-wing' approach.

DR

First of all, AC and DR's letters express the extent of confusion among Victorian teachers that has been deliberately created by the Australian Education Union (AEU) since it first announced its deal with the state Labor government of Premier John Brumby. In order to achieve ratification of its 2008-2011 industrial agreement by the membership, the union has resorted to systematic misinformation, outright deception, and ongoing attempts to intimidate opposition.

The key demands of the teachers' year-long campaign—including two stop-work mass meetings and a series of rolling stoppages—have been a 30

percent pay rise over three years, a maximum class size of 20 students, and the provision of permanent positions for contract teachers. Not one of these demands has been met. The AEU's proposal delivers a real wage cut for many teachers and contains provisions that will further undermine the public education system.

It is important to note that AC is not just a teacher. He is also a member of the AEU's 120-member state council, the body responsible for the union's policies and campaigns between annual state conferences. Faithfully mouthing the bureaucracy's rhetoric, he declares, "There isn't one teacher who isn't going to get a pay rise out of this agreement", and accuses the Socialist Equality Party of getting its figures wrong. The truth is that it is the union itself that has very carefully and consciously misrepresented the new wage scales.

AC lauds the deal for its proposed salary structure for first-year teachers. Let us examine the actual figures. According to the document, first-year teachers will go from an annual salary of \$46,127 to \$51,184, an initial increase of 10.96 percent. In the subsequent three years—2009, 2010, and 2011—they will receive a 2.71 percent annual increase. This is significantly less than the current official inflation rate of 4.2 percent. In other words, the initial increase will be clawed back over the subsequent three years through the erosive impact of inflation.

By January 2011, first-year teachers will receive \$55,459, a total increase of 20.23 percent on their current salary. But teachers last received a pay rise in October 2006, so the total percentage increase has to be divided by five years to give a true picture of the actual annual salary progression of entry-level teachers. On this basis, the real annual increase is about equivalent to the inflation rate.

In fact, however, the rise in the cost of living for ordinary working people is far higher than the Reserve Bank's figure of 4.2 percent. The prices of necessities such as petrol, food, childcare, and housing are rapidly escalating. Rising interest rates, together with higher house prices, have left broad sections of the working class, including many teachers, without hope of ever purchasing their own home. Renting in urban centres is increasingly difficult, and in Melbourne, the median weekly rent for a house has increased by 23 percent, to \$375 a week, in the last twelve months alone.

AC echoes the AEU's claim that the new salary scale will entice significantly more young people into the teaching profession. But how many more will choose to spend a minimum of four-years studying full-time at university—incurring HECS fees, which for maths and science teachers total between \$25,000 and \$32,000—on the basis of a starting salary of \$55,459 in 2011? This sum equates to less than \$790 in the hand per week after tax and automatic HECS deductions. Moreover, most young teachers are on contracts—last year 75 percent of first-year teachers and 60 percent of third-year graduates were employed on a non-permanent basis. With no job security, these teachers find it very difficult to secure a mortgage or to plan for the future.

How do the new teachers' pay rates compare to those of workers in

other sectors—including those requiring significantly fewer qualifications? According to Career One, secretaries in Melbourne with 12 months experience now earn an average salary of \$46,000, on par with what first-year teachers currently receive. Outbound telesales workers at call centres make an average of \$48,000. By 2011, first-years will earn the equivalent of what “team leaders” at these call centres now earn, but still substantially less than crane hoist and lift operators (\$67,000), train drivers (\$72,000), or tax accountants (\$80,000).

Senior teachers (those officially classified as “E4”) currently receive \$66,467 annually. Under the agreement this will initially rise to \$75,500 (a 13.59 percent increase), but go up by just 2.71 percent in 2009, 2010, and 2011. In the end, senior teachers will receive \$81,806 a year, a 23.08 percent total increase. Again, if one divides this annually between 2011 and late 2006, when teachers received their last pay increase, the AEU’s agreement delivers less than 5 percent a year. AC anticipates that this “victory” will ensure that teachers “stay in the system”. In fact the deal will do nothing to stem the ongoing exodus from the profession by teachers who rightly regard themselves as being underpaid, overworked, and under-resourced.

For all those teachers on the middle bands, the agreement cuts substantially into their real wages, with an initial pay increase of 4.9 percent, followed by a 2.71 percent annual rise between 2009 and 2011. Many teachers, including those who believe they will personally benefit from the proposed agreement, have opposed the deal on the grounds that all teachers ought to be equally treated. To the extent it is better for first-year and senior teachers than for all the rest, it creates entrenched inequities that will be fostered and utilised by the AEU and the government to channel teachers’ legitimate anger and opposition against their colleagues, rather against those actually responsible: the AEU and the Labor government.

Union officials have repeatedly insisted that every teacher will receive an annual salary increase of between 5.19 and 11.51 percent over the next three years. This is a fraud, involving yet another sleight of hand.

The AEU’s figures are derived from the “VSGA08 salary table”, published on its web site. This extraordinary table presents the incremental salary gains that teachers would have received anyway—as they gain seniority and move up the wage increment scale—as part of the proposed agreement. So, for example, first-year teachers in 2008 would generally—although not automatically—move up three levels to “A2” by 2011. By combining the annual increment increases involved in this transition with the altered pay rate under the new agreement, the AEU has calculated that current first-year teachers will be 34.53 percent better off in 2011 than they were in 2008. Divide this combined figure by 3 and you get 11.51 percent—the annual increase the union insists represents the upper end of the gains won through the new agreement.

This method is absurd. Any objective assessment must involve teachers’ pay being compared across equivalent classifications.

Take the “A2” category—AC’s own. These teachers currently receive an annual salary of \$54,598. In 2011, under the proposed agreement, A2 teachers will be granted \$62,057, a total increase of 13.66 percent. The annual equivalent, again calculated on the basis of the five year gap between 2011 and the teachers’ last pay increase, equals 2.73 percent. This is a far cry from the AEU’s bogus method of calculation, according to which A2 teachers will receive 8.5 percent more each year under the agreement!

AC attacks as “garbage” the characterisation of the AEU as “defunct” made by SEP supporter and Dandenong Secondary College teacher, Ollie, during one of the delegates’ meetings. In fact, he was simply voicing the animosity felt by many teachers towards the union.

Not only is the union defunct—i.e., useless—from the standpoint of securing a decent wage rise, its actual role goes far beyond this. From a very limited mechanism for defending teachers’ wages and conditions, it

has become transformed, over the past two and a half decades, into the primary mechanism through which successive state Liberal and Labor governments have slashed spending, shut down schools, victimised teachers who have failed to toe the line, and pushed for greater teacher-student “productivity”. The union, in other words, has become an active agency for the government’s “pro-market” reforms, functioning as an industrial police force within the school system, enforcing discipline and rooting out opposition.

Nowhere is this role more clearly revealed than in the proposed agreement’s embrace of the Labor government’s so-called education “Blueprint”.

The teachers’ industrial campaign was never solely, or even primarily, concerned with wages, but rather with conditions, teaching contracts, and class sizes. Their workload has increased immeasurably in recent years, with grossly inadequate allowances for preparation and correction time. The official 38-hour working week is nothing but a fiction for the many teachers forced to work far longer hours without compensation. Unlike other sections of the working class, teachers receive no over-time or penalty rates. At certain times in the year, such as exam and report writing periods, teachers work extended hours outside the classroom, including on weekends, to complete their responsibilities. It is taken for granted in most schools that many teachers will use some of their sick leave entitlements to fulfil these various work requirements.

Far from delivering improvements, conditions are set to become significantly worse under the terms of the AEU-government deal. The text of the proposed agreement explicitly commits “parties bound to the agreement” to the government’s Blueprint. But what exactly does this entail? Without discussing them at all, the union is attempting to smuggle in a series of new and deeply reactionary measures.

The Blueprint aims to tie school funding to continuous improvements in student test results. This 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. Schools have been deliberately pitted against one another, with those labelled “underperforming” targeted for closure. A number of schools, invariably the poorest, have been told that the only way they can access extra funding is to amalgamate.

The new agreement will see the creation of entirely new categories of teachers, as projected by the Blueprint. “Executive class” principals earning up to \$200,000 a year can be inserted into “underperforming” schools in order to better advance the government’s productivity-based standardised testing agenda. Bonuses will be paid for meeting set targets, marking the first introduction of effective performance pay in Victorian public schools.

That the proposed deal contains no commitments on class sizes—and explicitly endorses the ongoing use of contract teachers (who now comprise one-fifth of the total workforce)—is entirely consistent with the Blueprint’s drive to “rationalise” the public education system.

In response to the question from our second correspondent, DR: all these measures are right-wing—i.e., they all conform with the push for public education to achieve greater productivity to meet the demands of big business for specific, narrowly defined skills and a flexible labour pool. (See: “Details of the proposed AEU-Victorian government sell-out teachers’ agreement”)

The AEU’s support for the Blueprint underscores its role over the last 25 years as an accomplice of successive government attacks on the public education system.

In the early 1990s, the state Labor government of Joan Kirner introduced “District Provision”. Under the banner of providing “greater curriculum choice”, dozens of schools were amalgamated and closed, with AEU representatives participating as District Provision committee members. This drive to “rationalise” state education was then accelerated

under the 1992-1999 Liberal government of Jeff Kennett, with more than 300 schools shut down and 9,000 teachers' jobs—more than 20 percent of the state's teaching workforce—slashed. The AEU refused to mobilise its members to fight these measures and when teachers took industrial action to defend their schools, the union isolated them.

AC writes: "I would love to see someone like Ollie negotiate with the government..." implying that this was the aim of the SEP supporter's intervention at the delegates' meeting. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. From the outset of this dispute, the SEP has insisted that the old perspective of pressuring the government for concessions and reforms has completely collapsed and that, accordingly, the defence of public education can only be taken forward on the basis of an entirely opposed perspective: one that begins, not with what this or that government can or cannot afford, but with what teachers, parents and students require for the fulfilment of all their educational, intellectual and creative needs.

That is why we insist that the struggle over wages, class sizes and permanent, full-time teaching positions must be taken out of the hands of the union. Teachers themselves must intervene, through the development of a coordinated industrial and political campaign, involving parents, principals, administrative education staff, and broader layers of the working class that will link their campaign with those of other workers fighting to defend their jobs, wages, and conditions, including teachers in New South Wales and other states, Victorian car workers, Qantas engineers, and NSW power workers opposing privatisation.

AC's informs us that any such opposition to the AEU deal would cost teachers the support of "parents and the public". Once again this is both false and self-serving. One of the defining characteristics of the year-long industrial campaign has been the high level of public support it has consistently won. That is why the AEU leadership immediately trumpeted its deal with the government as a "historic victory" when it was announced by Mary Bluett and John Brumby on May 3. These claims—issued more than a week before teachers themselves were permitted to see the agreement—were given blanket coverage by the media, and used to convince the wider public that the campaign had succeeded and was therefore over. The aim was to place maximum pressure on teachers: if they didn't ratify the deal, it was because they were selfish and indifferent to the needs of their students.

AC goes on to insist that "the views of whoever wrote this article are not the views of the majority of teachers". If that were, indeed, the case then why has he, and the union, been so concerned to suppress the SEP's views? As it stands no-one has any definitive basis for assessing what the views of ordinary teachers are. The union has refused to call a mass meeting to allow teachers their basic democratic right to discuss and debate the deal.

Instead, a series of anti-democratic so-called "delegates'" meetings has been held, designed to minimise participation, restrict debate, and ensure the ratification of the agreement. The selection of delegates was organised on an entirely ad hoc manner. An SEP-sponsored resolution calling for mass meetings was repeatedly ruled "out of order" and suppressed.

To the extent that delegates voted for the deal, it was the product, in many cases, of an understanding that, under the auspices of the union, nothing else could be done. The union's contempt for these teachers was given consummate expression by AC in his email, when he concluded: "If you are not happy with the leadership, don't be a member Ollie!". According to AC, teachers should passively accept whatever the union dishes out, unquestioningly rubber stamp its squalid deals, and if not in favour, keep their mouths shut.

This is, of course, the union's position—and one for which it fights with great ferocity, undermining its members' fundamental rights in the process.

The SEP, on the contrary, calls for all teachers to take a stand and vote

"no" to the AEU-Brumby government deal in the secret ballot that will take place through the branches for final ratification of the agreement.

As the SEP concluded in its May 20 statement on the teachers' struggle: "Teachers cannot advance their interests on the basis of a trade unionist perspective... 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."



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