

Teachers dispute in Victoria, Australia

Socialist Equality Party replies to Mary Bluett, AEU state president

The Socialist Equality Party
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Australian Education Union Victorian President Mary Bluett sent an email to teachers on June 23, replying to a Socialist Equality Party statement released three days earlier titled, “Why Victorian teachers should vote ‘no’ to the AEU-Labor government agreement”. Bluett’s response—like the AEU’s entire campaign for the proposed industrial agreement—evades the central issues facing teachers, selectively and misleadingly promoting certain aspects of the deal while remaining completely silent on others.

The deal negotiated between the AEU and the state Labor government of Premier John Brumby will determine teachers’ pay and conditions up to 2011. A secret ballot is underway in schools across the state this week, for teachers to vote on whether or not to ratify it.

That the union president has felt compelled to issue a reply to the SEP’s call for teachers to vote “no” in the midst of the ballot reflects the union’s awareness of the extent of oppositional sentiment among ordinary teachers. That is also why Bluett and her fellow bureaucrats have refused to hold mass meetings to allow an open and democratic discussion on the contents of the agreement.

Bluett attempts to cast the ballot as a *fait accompli*, writing: “AEU council has backed the schools agreement; AEU delegate meetings have backed the schools agreement; now it is time for the entire teaching and principal class workforce to have their say....” “This is a vital last vote,” she continues, “despite the overwhelming endorsement of the agreement by AEU members at the delegates ratification meetings earlier this month (where 89% backed the agreement), it will fall if it is not accepted by a majority of all staff covered by it.”

No-one except union officials can verify the accuracy of the reported 89 percent vote in favour, but what is indisputable is that the delegates’ meetings themselves

were thoroughly anti-democratic. Delegates were selected on an entirely ad hoc basis, and resolutions moved by SEP supporters demanding the calling of mass meetings were ruled out of order. Prior to the meetings, Bluett and her colleagues, having already publicly proclaimed the agreement a “victory”, warned they would not fight another industrial campaign and threatened that the Brumby government would invoke the former Howard government’s WorkChoices legislation, sending the dispute to the arbitration courts if the agreement were not ratified.

In her email dispatched on Monday, Bluett listed eight reasons to vote “yes”. On salaries, the union president insisted that: “Top of the scale classroom teachers would now earn up to \$75,500 a year—the highest pay in Australia”, “The starting salary at \$51,184 is also the nation’s best”, “Some 16,000 teachers get a \$10,000 pay rise overnight”, “Immediate pay rise of 4.9% (with one-off payments for most teachers of \$1000, \$1,500 for most leading teachers 2 and \$2000 for principals) followed by annual pay rises of 2.71% in January 2009, 2010, 2011—higher than current forecasts for CPI”, and “Guaranteed pay rise at the end of the agreement”.

The SEP has responded in detail to similar claims advanced by a member of the AEU state council. (See “Two letters and a reply on the teachers’ dispute in Victoria, Australia”) We noted that when accurately calculated over five years—i.e., from when teachers last received a pay rise in October 2006 until the expiration of the agreement in 2011—the so-called “victory” pay rise for senior and first-year teachers turned out to be nothing more than the current official inflation rate. For every other teacher, the deal delivers a substantial real wage cut. Bluett’s claim that the yearly increase of 2.71 from 2009 to 2011 outstrips the forecast consumer price index (CPI)

underscores just how remote she and the rest of the privileged bureaucracy are from the financial pressures on ordinary teachers, with prices for necessities such as housing, petrol, power bills, and groceries far exceeding the official CPI.

Moreover, the agreement further divides teachers, entrenching existing inequities by delivering different outcomes for different categories of teachers. Teachers working in the same school and performing the same tasks will earn very different salaries—creating the conditions for anger and resentments to develop, not against those responsible—i.e., the AEU and the government—but amongst teachers themselves.

On contract teachers and classroom conditions, Bluett's email has very little to say—just three bullet points: “Schools must now justify in writing every fixed-term contract they create—and it will be quicker and easier to be rolled over to an ongoing position”, “Contract teachers are guaranteed holiday pay”, “No trade offs on holiday or pupil free days”.

These claims are pathetic. One of the teachers' central demands in the course of their year-long industrial campaign was the provision of permanent places for those on contracts, who now comprise one-fifth of the total workforce, with the rate among young teachers even higher. Last year 75 percent of first-year teachers and 60 percent of third-year graduates were employed on a contract basis. Far from ensuring these teachers permanency, the agreement permanently entrenches contract labour.

Central to the deal, but not referred to in Bluett's email or in any other public comments by AEU bureaucrats, is its embrace of the state Labor government's education “Blueprint”. The Blueprint's right-wing agenda aims at the closure and amalgamation of schools in working class areas, limiting the funding of those in need, moving towards introducing performance pay for principals and teachers, and promoting a productivity-based system of standardised testing. While this amounts to a further assault on public education as a whole, it will cement the AEU's role as chief enforcer for the Labor government. Most teachers have no idea of this aspect of the industrial agreement. Nor are they aware of the new classroom categories, such as “teacher's assistants” and “executive class” principals that will be created over the next three years as part of the Blueprint's agenda.

Bluett is also silent on class sizes. That is because the union has simply abandoned the demand for a maximum class size of 20 pupils, leaving teachers burdened with

excessive workloads and no way of paying each child the attention they require.

The AEU-Brumby agreement does not deliver a wage rise. It delivers the next stage in the 25-year-long downgrading of public education by state and federal governments alike, and further undermines the rights and conditions of teachers and students.

The Socialist Equality Party once again urges all teachers to take a stand and vote “no”. Such a vote must be accompanied by a determined struggle on the part of teachers themselves to turn out to parents, to teachers in New South Wales, South Australia, Queensland and around the country who are also involved in the fight to defend their wages and conditions, and to other sections of the working class facing the same financial pressures, job insecurity and attacks on working conditions.

This struggle will bring teachers into conflict, not only with the AEU, but with the state and federal Labor governments, which are being driven by the demands of the major corporations for higher productivity and “international competitiveness” to place the full burden of the global financial crisis on the backs of ordinary working people. It requires a new political perspective and program: one that starts, not with what the “market” and governments can afford, but with the needs of teachers, parents and students for a fully funded, fully resourced public education system, that is able to nourish and develop the intellectual, creative and physical talents and capacities of all young people.

We encourage teachers—and all workers—to study the history and program of the Socialist Equality Party and make the decision to fight for its growth and development as the new mass party of the working class.



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