

Australia: Why Victorian teachers ratified the AEU's sell-out industrial agreement

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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According to results published last week on the Victorian Education Department's website, 84.7 percent of public school teachers voted to accept the sell-out industrial agreement drawn up by the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the state Labor government of Premier John Brumby. The ballot outcome marks the culmination of a ferocious campaign mounted by the union bureaucracy to ram through the agreement in the face of widespread opposition among ordinary teachers. It is a significant defeat, and one whose impact will be felt—sooner rather than later—by teachers and their students in classrooms across the state.

The outcome of the vote reflected no genuine support for the AEU-Brumby deal. From the moment of its release, broad layers of teachers understood they had been betrayed. Having campaigned for more than a year for a 30 percent pay rise over three years, for classes to be restricted to no more than 20 pupils, and for contract teachers to be given permanent positions, the bureaucracy delivered an agreement that amounted to a significant real wage cut for many, entrenched and extended the use of contract labour, and will lead to a further deterioration in teaching conditions.

One of the defining features of the last few months was the emergence of a broad discussion within the public education system, with teachers exchanging emails and blog sites denouncing different aspects of both the agreement and the AEU leadership's role.

The majority vote therefore was a contradictory phenomenon. While there were certainly teachers who supported the deal, for the majority, the outcome was an expression of their lack of confidence in the union leadership. These teachers were convinced that the union would not fight for anything better and saw no alternative but to accept, albeit with severe misgivings, the terms of the deal.

The AEU consciously cultivated this sentiment from the very outset. More than a week before the text was made available to teachers, union president Mary Bluett publicly kissed Premier Brumby in gratitude for what she described as the best deal reached in decades. Having ensured that the public mistakenly believed that the teachers' demands had been met, Bluett then declared that if they rejected it, they would be regarded as greedy.

The union spared no effort in isolating its members and preventing a genuine discussion from being held. The delegates' meetings that were convened were simply part of the bureaucracy's campaign to present a fait accompli. Delegates were selected in an entirely arbitrary and at times antidemocratic manner, while the meetings themselves were deliberately scheduled to make it as difficult as possible for ordinary teachers to attend. The union ruled "out of order" motions sponsored by the Socialist Equality Party calling for mass meetings, a full and free debate, and the right of teachers to cast an informed vote. Delegates voted for or against the agreement by placing their accreditation slips (listing their name and school, thereby allowing the union to keep a record of all those in opposition) in a "yes" or "no" box. These unprecedented methods delivered the desired result; according to the union, 89 percent backed the

deal.

The AEU's main argument, advanced in every delegates' meeting and in school sub-branch meetings, was that teachers had to take it or leave it. Acting as a mouthpiece for the state Labor government, the union threatened that rejection would see Brumby invoke the former Howard government's vicious industrial relations legislation, as it did previously with the nurses, to make further industrial action illegal and to drag the dispute through the arbitration courts. Such a process would likely deliver an even worse outcome.

These intimidatory tactics raised before teachers the necessity of taking their struggle out of the hands of the union. The Socialist Equality Party called on them to reject the agreement, not as a "protest" or as part of some attempt to pressure the bureaucracy to deliver a better outcome—the futile perspective advanced by the AEU "rank-and-file" Teachers Alliance group—but rather as the first step towards the development of an independent political movement against both the federal and state Labor governments. The SEP encouraged teachers to elect trusted colleagues to rank-and-file committees, totally bypassing the union's bureaucratic apparatus, and to unite their struggle with that of other sections of the working class.

Significantly, in those schools where members and supporters of the SEP were able to advance an alternative perspective, the vote on the agreement was very different to the reported state-wide total. According to unofficial figures received by the *World Socialist Web Site*, teachers at Moonee Ponds West Primary rejected the agreement by 19 votes to 6 (76 percent opposed). Similarly, at Dandenong High School campus, 39 teachers voted "no" and 36 "yes". At other schools there were more "no" votes in the general ballot than there were in the delegates meetings. At Niddrie Secondary College, for example, 39 teachers voted for the agreement and 28 (42 percent) against. At Horsham College, 43 voted "yes" and 8 (16 percent) "no", a result that contrasted with the earlier delegates' meeting in the area, where 100 percent voted for the agreement.

New political perspective required

The central lesson that teachers, and the working class as a whole, must draw from this bitter experience is the necessity for a conscious political break from the Labor Party and the trade unions, which function as Labor's industrial policemen, and the embrace of an alternative socialist perspective. The plain truth is that the struggles that will inevitably emerge as the global economic crisis deepens will be defeated so long as working people remain trapped within the framework determined by these moribund, pro-capitalist organisations.

The AEU-state Labor government agreement was fully endorsed by the

federal Labor government, which came to power last November with support from decisive sections of the Australian ruling elite. At the heart of Labor leader Rudd's election campaign was his attempt to outflank former prime minister Howard from the right on economic policy. One of Rudd's key policies was the launching of an "education revolution" based on a new wave of right-wing, "free market" economic reform, that would drive up productivity and profits. Demands that he deliver have intensified with the unfolding of the US sub-prime mortgage crisis and the resultant "credit crunch" in global financial markets—which have already had a major impact on the Australian economy. Just this week, the Bank for International Settlements warned that the combination of a US recession with escalating inflation elsewhere had led the world economy to a "tipping point". Like its counterparts around the globe, the Rudd Labor government will place the full burden of this economic crisis squarely on the backs of the working class. Rising inflation will be met with closures, job shedding, cuts to real wages and the slashing of social spending.

Already, after just seven months in office, the Rudd government has provoked significant dissatisfaction and hostility among many working people, as revealed in the substantial swings against Labor in the June 28 federal and state by-elections in the Victorian seats of Gippsland and Kororoit. The teachers' dispute was both a reflection and forerunner of this developing political shift. In several of the delegates' meetings a more critical and politically conscious approach was evident on the part of many teachers. At the Eltham meeting, for example, teachers angrily denounced the union leadership for accepting the Brumby government's nostrums of "productivity" and "affordability".

The Socialist Equality Party explained from the outset of the teachers' dispute that the struggle for decent wages and conditions would bring teachers into head-on conflict with the Rudd government and its right-wing agenda, and that the AEU would do everything it possibly could to prevent such a conflict. The union promoted the illusion that the Brumby government could somehow be pressured—through limited industrial action, protests outside MPs offices, and letter writing campaigns—to accede to the teachers' demands.

At the same time, the AEU used the age-old method of inciting divisions among its members. The agreement it negotiated delivers an initial salary rise of \$9,000 a year for senior teachers, in addition to a one-off "bonus" of \$1,000 for some teachers. While this will be clawed back through subsequent below-inflation annual increases up to 2011, the AEU tried to exploit the initial pay rise to secure support for the deal from senior teachers—many of whom are struggling with cost of living increases and the need to fund their retirement. Some teachers reportedly voted in favour on the basis that the initial pay rise would top up their superannuation, allowing them to quit the public education system in the near future.

All teachers other than first-year and senior will receive just 4.9 percent more this year, followed by annual increases of 2.7 percent until 2011—significantly lower than the forecast increase in the cost of living. No doubt realising that this would be regarded by many teachers as completely unacceptable, the AEU carried out a sleight-of-hand, presenting normal seniority incremental salary increases as new gains won under the new agreement. The Brumby government inadvertently let the cat out of the bag when it admitted that the deal would require no change to its existing budgetary arrangements, which were based on its original offer to teachers (which was rejected out of hand) of an annual 3.25 percent pay increase.

The highly divisive and inequitable nature of the deal provoked considerable friction within many schools during the ratification process. Such divisions—which have been consciously stoked by the AEU in an effort to channel teachers' anger against each other, rather than against the union and the Labor government—will only intensify once the agreement comes into effect. The AEU has locked teachers into a three-

year industrial contract that contains no provisions for cost of living or inflation indexation. If the economic situation spirals out of control, as many are now predicting, teachers will be bound to a massive wage cut. No matter how high inflation rises—no matter what the cost of oil or food, or where interest rates go, or the state of Melbourne's rental market—every public school teacher will receive a nominal wage increase of no more than 2.7 percent in 2009, 2010, and 2011.

In defence of public education

Contract teachers, who now comprise one-fifth of the total teaching workforce, have been dealt an even bigger blow. Despite joining the AEU and its campaign of mass meetings and rolling stoppages, contract teachers have been left without any assurance of a permanent position. The agreement explicitly endorses the ongoing use of contracts and fails to make any challenge to the current school funding system, which leaves principals no choice but to restrict the number of their permanent staff in order to keep within budget.

The predicament of contract teachers is just one aspect of the systematic degradation of classroom conditions that the agreement will create. This is because it contains explicit support for the Brumby government's education "Blueprint". The "Blueprint", first unveiled in 2003, ties school funding to continuous improvements in student results in standardised tests. With the public education system starved of the necessary funding, "underperforming" schools (predominantly in working class and impoverished areas) have been targeted for closure and amalgamation. The AEU's deal entrenches its role as the Blueprint's primary enforcer, while also introducing a raft of new measures, including new categories such as "teachers' assistants"—which will further undermine permanent teaching positions—and "executive class" principals—who are effectively remunerated on the basis of "performance pay".

Federal Labor's "education revolution" dovetails completely with Victorian Labor's Blueprint. Rudd wants a national standardised testing regime similar to that already devised by Brumby and his predecessor, Bracks. Test results will be used to develop "league tables", forcing schools to compete with each other and targeting more for closure. Similar schemes promoted for many years by the British Labour government have proven damaging to students, with teachers forced to coach their pupils for never-ending rounds of tests rather than focussing on their educational needs. (See "Britain: SATs school tests criticised by official report")

The deliberate conversion of the public education system into an underfunded and second-rate option, reserved only for those whose parents are unable to afford private schooling, is a process that is underway throughout the world. In the months preceding the ratification of the AEU agreement, Victorian teachers' counterparts in Britain, France, and the US took industrial action in defence of their pay and conditions. But the AEU separated its membership, not only from their colleagues in other countries but also from those in other Australian states, such as New South Wales and South Australia, who are also campaigning for new industrial agreements.

The Socialist Equality Party advocates the expenditure of billions of dollars on public education as one of the most critical priorities of a complex, advanced society. Everyone requires full access to a properly-resourced, freely available, and high quality school system that gives young people the chance to fully develop their talents, intellects and capacities. Teachers, like all other workers, require pay and conditions that enable them to engage fully in society, to live in high quality housing, access decent transport, full, high quality medical care and working conditions that enable them to teach in a healthy and fully resourced

environment. These are the priorities, not what the government and the financial markets decide is “affordable” and “responsible”. Such a program is realisable only as part of a far broader reorganisation of social and economic life, where the world’s productive capacities and technological resources are utilised in the interests of the social needs of the majority rather than the profit- and wealth-accumulating interests of a narrow minority.

The precondition for this reorganisation is the building of a new mass party of the working class—the Socialist Equality Party—based on a socialist and internationalist program. We urge teachers, as well as youth and all working people, to contact the *World Socialist Web Site*, make a serious study of our history and program and apply to join our party. We also encourage all workers and youth to attend the SEP’s public meeting, “The Australian Education Union, the Labor Party, and the political lessons of the Victorian teachers’ struggle”, being held on Sunday, July 20, at 2.00 p.m. in the East Melbourne Library.



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