

Australia: Victorian teachers union announces sell-out deal

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The Australian Education Union (AEU) in Victoria last week announced that it had reached an in-principle agreement with the state Liberal government, calling off a protracted dispute with the government. The deal imposes a real wage cut on public school teachers, further erodes working conditions within schools, and implements a new backdoor mechanism for so-called performance pay for teachers.

Attempting to cover up the sell-out, AEU state secretary Meredith Peace declared that the agreement marked an “historic achievement” and “significant win”. The union resorted to blatant lies about the wages component of the new three-year enterprise bargaining agreement.

The union claimed that teachers would receive pay increases of between 16.1 and 20.5 percent over three years, plus a \$1,000 one-off bonus payment, with no productivity offsets. Teachers were told they would be the second highest paid in the country. The media amplified the union’s claims, with the *Age*’s front page headline last Thursday blaring, “Teachers win big pay deal.”

In reality, the 16-20 percent wage rise figure was a fiction concocted by the union by including in its figures the annual incremental wage rise that most teachers would have received anyway as they gained in seniority. The actual wage rise conceded by the government was for 3 percent in 2013, 2.75 percent in 2014 and 2.75 percent in 2015.

This outcome is consistent with the government’s public sector wages ceiling of 2.5 percent per year, with anything in addition offset by “productivity” savings. The proposed agreement only marginally exceeds the official inflation rate, with the consumer price index at 2.2 percent. The real costs of living confronting ordinary people—for housing, transport, healthcare,

childcare and other necessities—are significantly higher.

Underscoring the union bureaucracy’s contempt for teachers, the full text of the agreement has not yet been released. The AEU has admitted, however, that there will be no improvements to class sizes. The union has promoted a new “process” to “monitor” the use of contract teachers—but this is another fig leaf. Nearly one-fifth of all teachers, and half of new teachers, will remain employed on insecure contracts.

The proposed agreement junks provisions to guarantee “excess teachers”—i.e. those considered no longer required by a school, due to falling enrolments or other issues—a position in another school. The full details are yet to be unveiled, but last Thursday AEU state deputy secretary Carolyn Clancy reported to a regional meeting of teachers in Yarraville that if excess teachers have not found a placement within a year they will be made redundant. This will effectively eliminate teacher permanency and facilitate the government’s stated goal of sacking 5 percent of the teaching workforce.

The union claimed that the absence of any clause in the agreement promoting “performance pay” was a significant gain. Immediately after the deal was announced, however, the government made clear it was pressing ahead with this regressive agenda, which is aimed at dividing teachers against one another.

Premier Denis Napthine declared that the deal would “provide principals with much greater flexibility ... the agreement makes it clear that there will be full merit-based recruitment, appointment and progression through the ranks.” Education Minister Peter Hall added that new conditions would be imposed on teachers’ annual incremental wage rises: “[R]ather than an automatic progression through each of those salary levels, as has been the practice in the past, there will be

a rigorous assessment of performance.” He expected the majority of teachers to be promoted each year—but “perhaps not the great majority”.

The AEU has attempted to cover up this significant shift. On its Facebook site, the union declared that “there is NO CHANGE to the way staff will increment under this agreement ... If the government does want to change the system in future it will have to consult us first.”

The government does not need to make any changes to impose this backdoor mechanism for performance pay. In 2001, under the previous state Labor government, the AEU imposed another sell-out agreement that tied teaching promotions “to improvements in student learning” (see “Pay-for-performance reintroduced into Australian schools”). This clause was not subsequently enforced, with 99.9 percent of teachers moving up the salary scale each year. Now, however, the Napthine government is proceeding, taking advantage of the mechanisms to which the AEU has already agreed. Teachers will be targeted if they fail to deliver on NAPLAN standardised test outcomes and other requirements of the education “reforms” being implemented by the federal Labor government in collaboration with the Victorian state administration.

There is widespread opposition to the sellout. Teachers have been engaged in industrial action over the past 18 months, including three one-day strikes and mass meetings, rolling half-day stoppages and work bans, all organised by the union to head off discontent by claiming to be leading a fight against the government. A discussion has now erupted on social media web sites, with teachers accusing the union of betraying their interests and treating them like idiots for manipulating the proposed wage deal. Several said they were quitting the AEU. One teacher commented: “[A]ny withdrawal from the union must be enacted en masse—on a date and as a public and deliberate action—not individually when it has little impact.”

The pseudo-left organisations have rushed to defend the AEU. The misnamed Socialist Alternative published an assessment of the proposed agreement that began with the “good news” that teachers “beat back performance pay!” The article then dealt with the “bad news” of the agreement, before emphasising that quitting the AEU “is not the answer: we need to stay in

the union and fight to improve it.”

Socialist Alternative, which plays a leading role in the Teachers and Education Support Alliance (TESA), has actively collaborated with the AEU bureaucracy throughout the industrial dispute, voting in favour of the union leadership’s resolutions at all three mass meetings. It has done everything it can to block teachers from understanding the political forces they are up against, preventing the emergence of any challenge to the federal Gillard government.

Socialist Alternative and TESA are now posturing as opponents of the proposed agreement only in order to channel anger and opposition back into the framework of the AEU.

The union is attempting to anti-democratically ram through ratification of the agreement in hastily organised delegates’ meetings beginning on April 29, leaving virtually no time for teachers to read the proposed deal, let alone discuss its implications.

The AEU’s latest betrayal underscores the reality that teachers cannot take a single step forward in defence of their interests, including decent wages and conditions, and in defence of public education, through the union. A rebellion against the AEU is required. New organisations must be developed—rank and file committees of teachers, education workers and students in every school—and a turn made to other sections of the working class confronting similar attacks, beginning with university staff facing Gillard’s billion-dollar cuts, TAFE staff being hit with mass layoffs, and other public sector workers.

The defence of public education requires a political struggle against both the federal Labor and the state Liberal governments, and a fight for a workers’ government committed to socialist policies. This revolutionary perspective is alone advanced by the Socialist Equality Party. We urge teachers to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and begin a discussion on these critical issues.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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