

Reject the Australian Education Union's sellout agreement!

For a political offensive of the working class to defend public education

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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The Socialist Equality Party calls on Victorian public school teachers to reject the sell-out agreement between the Australian Education Union and the state Liberal government, backed by the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Gillard. The vote against this agreement must be the first step in a new political offensive of the working class in defence of the public education system.

The rotten deal stitched up by the union behind the backs of teachers not only accepts all the central demands of the Victorian government. It opens the way for further attacks on teachers and public education through the Gillard government's so-called education revolution.

Teachers mounted an 18-month campaign of industrial action, including three one-day strikes and mass meetings, to advance their demands: a 30 percent wage rise over three years, smaller class sizes, reduced use of contract teachers (currently nearly one-fifth of the total teaching workforce) and a cap on weekly teaching hours. Not a single one of these demands has been met.

The AEU has attempted to cover up its betrayal with outright lies. These began on the first day that the "in principle" agreement was announced, with the union leadership declaring the deal to be a "historic achievement", involving a wage rise of 16-20 percent over three years. This falsehood, which was trumpeted in the mass media, was based on including incremental pay rises that most teachers automatically receive as they gain seniority. Pay will in fact rise between 2.75 and 3 percent annually—a real wage cut.

The proposed agreement will significantly worsen teachers' working conditions. It junks current provisions to guarantee a position in another school for so-called "excess teachers", facilitating the government's goal of sacking 5 percent of the teaching workforce. The state

government has also made clear that previously established performance pay mechanisms, agreed to by the AEU in 2001, will be actively enforced for the first time. Annual incremental salary increases will now be subject, as education minister Peter Hall explained, to "rigorous assessment of performance".

In other words, teachers' salaries, working conditions, and employment security are to be integrated into the regressive standardised testing regime that is being spearheaded by the Gillard government's NAPLAN system.

The union's stated opposition to performance pay is a sham. The AEU sabotaged a planned boycott of the NAPLAN tests in 2010, and joined the government's "working party" that has since assisted the government to implement the testing regime. The AEU has also publicly campaigned for the Labor government's new Gonski school funding model that will lay the foundation for a voucher system and further undermine public schools. Gillard has also tied the new funding scheme to testing benchmarks, including annual "performance reviews" for teachers.

The regressive character of the AEU agreement finds expression in the anti-democratic methods being used to impose it. After calling a series of stage-managed mass meetings, in which opposition was bureaucratically suppressed, the union is now seeking to ram through the agreement via hastily convened delegates meetings. Teachers are being asked to elect delegates even before seeing the content of the deal. The union's refusal to release the agreement in full, a week after publicly announcing it, underscores the bureaucracy's utter contempt for ordinary teachers. This is a continuation of the union's anti-democratic methods in 2008, when the

previous agreement was rammed through in the face of widespread disquiet and opposition.

It is time to act on the lessons of these experiences! Teachers need to take matters into their own hands. Within the political and organisational straitjacket of the union, no campaign in defence of teachers' wages and conditions is possible. Rank-and-file committees of teachers and education workers should be formed in every school, independent of and in opposition to the AEU, to overturn this agreement and begin a fightback against the deepening attacks on public education.

In advancing this struggle, teachers should draw on international experience, especially the Chicago teachers strike last October that involved many of the same issues as in Victoria, including working conditions and employment security. Much of the Gillard government's right-wing education agenda has been modelled on the American high stakes testing model that was initiated under President George Bush and advanced by the Obama administration.

In Chicago, the education union worked to subordinate the teachers to the city's Democratic administration and, through it, to Obama. Their chief enablers were the pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation (ISO), which presented the sell-out deal negotiated by the union as a "victory". The outcome of this betrayal was the forced closure of 61 schools across the city. The ISO's role is now being replicated by their counterparts in Australia, the Socialist Alternative group, which is part of the Teachers and Education Support Alliance (TESA), and has repeatedly held up Chicago as the model to be followed.

TESA has collaborated with the AEU leadership throughout the industrial dispute, including by voting for its resolutions at each of the three mass meetings. Now Socialist Alternative and TESA are posturing as opponents of the agreement even as they continue to cover up for the AEU leadership, including by promoting the lie that the proposed agreement "beats back performance pay".

While calling for a vote against the agreement, Socialist Alternative continues to function as the chief prop of the AEU bureaucracy. It is vehemently opposed to a political struggle against the federal Labor government, and like the union leadership has sought to cover up the fundamental issue involved in the industrial dispute: that teachers are involved in a fight against the entire political establishment. At the same time, the pseudo-lefts promote the illusion that teachers can defend their interests by

organising more militant industrial action through the AEU to pressure the state government.

The AEU does not function in the interests of teachers and it cannot be pressured to fight for their demands. The union is the critical mechanism through which the dictates of the Labor government, and the corporate and financial elites, are being imposed on teachers and the public education system.

New forms of struggle are required! Rank-and-file committees of school staff, parents and students need to turn out to other sections of the working class confronting similar attacks, beginning with teachers in every state, university staff facing Gillard's billion-dollar cuts, TAFE employees being hit with mass layoffs, and other public sector workers.

A counter-offensive to defend public education requires above all a political struggle against the federal Labor and state Liberal governments. The ruling elite in Australia, like its counterparts in the US and internationally, now regard public education as an intolerable expense to be targeted for destruction along with public healthcare, welfare, and other basic social services.

A fight to defend public education must be directly linked to the political struggle against the capitalist system, which is now being wracked by its deepest crisis since the 1930s, and for the bringing to power of a workers' government based on a socialist program. This is the revolutionary perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party. We urge teachers to contact the SEP and begin a discussion on the vital political issues that their struggle has raised.



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