

Australia: Socialist Alternative and the Victorian teachers' betrayal

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The middle class pseudo-left organisation Socialist Alternative has rushed to the defence of the Australian Education Union (AEU) in the wake of its sell-out agreement with the Victorian Liberal government. The reaction again demonstrates Socialist Alternative's role as a prop for the trade unions and an accomplice of the federal Labor government, whose reactionary "education revolution" is centrally responsible for the offensive against public school teachers in Victoria and throughout the country.

After a protracted 18-month industrial campaign by teachers, which included three one-day strikes and mass meetings, the AEU last week unveiled an in-principle agreement, declaring it represented a "historic achievement," with wage rises of up to 20.5 percent. However, the union had fudged the figures by fraudulently including the annual incremental gains most teachers would have received anyway. The state government had actually agreed to annual rises of just 2.75 to 3 percent, a real wage cut.

In addition, the union agreed to measures making it easier to fire teachers deemed "in excess" to schools' needs. The government will also implement mechanisms, previously accepted by the AEU, to replace near-automatic annual incremental wage rises with performance pay benchmarks. (See: "Victorian teachers union announces sell-out deal")

All of this has been done behind the backs of teachers in closed door talks. The AEU has refused to release the full text of the agreement. Union members only learnt about the real content of the deal through leaks in the establishment media.

Anger among ordinary teachers has erupted on social media web sites. Many AEU school delegates reported that teachers had quit the union in disgust. Some teachers called on their colleagues to coordinate an en masse resignation.

Such is the outrage among teachers that Socialist Alternative, after staunchly defending the union over the past year, felt compelled to oppose the agreement and call for a no vote. Its "opposition," however, is designed to prevent the outrage from developing into a revolt against the AEU itself.

In an article published last Thursday, "Don't believe the hype! Victorian teachers question pay deal," Socialist Alternative's Manolya Moustafa declared that the agreement contained good news as well as bad. As "good news",

Moustafa promoted the AEU's false claim to have beaten back performance pay.

Moustafa got to the real point of the article when she declared: "Already the AEU Facebook page is flooded with criticisms from members who feel they have been duped by the union leadership. Some teachers are talking about resigning from the union." She declared: "This is not the answer: we need to stay in the union and fight to improve it."

This is an attempt to keep teachers trapped in an organisation that in no way defends their interests. The AEU has been the critical mechanism on which successive governments, state and federal, have relied to make deep inroads into public education at the expense of teachers and students. In Victoria, the union is responsible for imposing repeated sell-outs, creating the situation where the state has become the model for the "reforms" to public education that Prime Minister Julia Gillard is now extending nationally.

The AEU's latest betrayal is part of a universal process in Australia and internationally. The globalisation of production over the past three decades has shattered the program of national reformism on which the trade unions were based. In Australia, as in every country, they have been transformed into instruments of management and government to ensure the "international competitiveness" of Australian businesses. For public education, this has meant a never-ending drive to slash costs, restructure public schools to meet corporate needs and open up new opportunities for profit by private institutions.

The AEU, like other unions, is ruthless in suppressing any criticism or opposition from workers. In response, however, it is not enough simply to quit the union in protest. New forms of organisation are required—rank-and-file committees of teachers, education workers, parents and students, independent from and in opposition to the AEU—to wage a political fight to defend public education. This is precisely what Socialist Alternative, acting on behalf of the AEU, is seeking to prevent.

Socialist Alternative, together with another pseudo-radical organisation Socialist Alliance, leads the Teachers and Education Support Alliance (TESA) faction within the AEU. TESA postures as a "militant" alternative, but shares the political outlook of the current AEU leadership and collaborates closely with it. If its members were promoted into

the leadership, they would be the ones imposing the sell-out on teachers, just as countless other “left” ginger groups have done in the past.

In a revealing incident in last November, TESA leaked the news that the union was preparing to give the government greater leeway to sack “excess” teachers. When the AEU state president complained that TESA had breached the union’s “confidentiality commitment” with the government at a “very delicate point in our negotiations,” TESA immediately fell into line, telling teachers to cease circulating the information.

In all three mass meetings, Socialist Alternative and their TESA colleagues voted in favour of the official AEU resolutions that sought to curtail industrial action while the union and the government stitched up an agreement behind closed doors. The pseudo-lefts voted against the only alternative resolutions advanced—by members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party—that warned of a sell-out and proposed that teachers to take matters out of the hands of the AEU, mobilise independently and turn to other sections of the working class to mount a campaign based on socialist policies to defend public education against the state and federal governments.

Like the AEU, Socialist Alternative criticises the state Liberal government but remains completely silent on the role of the Gillard Labor government in setting the framework for the attacks on public education in every state. The AEU has helped the Gillard government implement its NAPLAN standardised testing regime and publicly campaigned for the new Gonski school funding model, which entrenches public funding for the wealthiest private schools, while laying the foundation for a voucher scheme that will accelerate the shift of students to the private sector. The Gonski model promotes the linking of teachers’ salary levels to “performance reviews”—in other words, a system of “performance pay,” which the union claims to oppose.

In opposing the latest agreement, Socialist Alternative promotes the illusion that more militant action will pressure the state Liberal government into making concessions. “Sustained industrial action that shuts down schools and causes a political crisis for the government (like the history-making nine-day strike by Chicago teachers last year), is the way to force them to give us what we deserve,” Moustafa states in last week’s article.

The outcome of last year’s Chicago strike was a disaster for teachers. The union subordinated the struggle to the city’s Democratic administration and, through it, to President Obama and reached a sell-out deal that paved the way for a wave of school closures. (See: “Australia’s Socialist Alternative hails betrayal of Chicago teachers strike as a victory”).

Socialist Alternative is inspired by what happened in Chicago not because it was a victory for teachers, but because it provided a model of the role it is seeking to play within the unions in Australia. A member of the International Socialist

Organization (ISO), with which Socialist Alternative is aligned, was the vice-president of the Chicago teachers’ union and played the key role in suppressing opposition to the betrayal. Now in Victoria, the pseudo-lefts sense an opportunity to secure their promotion up the rungs of the AEU leadership. The media establishment is likewise conscious of the need for a “left” safety valve for the hostility of teachers to the union—the Melbourne *Age* last week featured Moustafa and Socialist Alternative in an article promoting them as opponents of the sell-out agreement.

The onslaught against public education in Australia is part of an international offensive, driven by the unfolding breakdown of the global economy. In the US, hundreds of schools have been shut down, and thousands of teachers sacked under Obama. A similar process is underway in Europe, with the latest attack involving a lockout of public school teachers by the Danish government.

Teachers in Victoria can only fight for decent pay and conditions as part of a broader struggle by the working class to defend public education. That requires a complete break from the AEU and their pseudo-left defenders and a campaign to mobilise teachers, parents, students and other workers independently in a political fight against the Gillard governments and its Labor and Liberal counterparts in every state.

This fight can advance only to the extent that is guided by a socialist perspective that begins not from the standpoint of what is “affordable” within the profit system but rather from the social needs of the working class. The resources exist for a fully funded, high quality education system—as they do to provide decent healthcare, housing and jobs for all who need them—but can be rationally allocated only under a workers’ government that places the banks and largest corporations in public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.



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