

Opposition grows to Australian Education Union sell-out in Victoria

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The Australian Education Union (AEU) in Victoria is confronting mounting opposition among teachers for its betrayal of their 18-month industrial dispute with the state Liberal government, backed by the federal Labor government, over a new enterprise agreement.

Yesterday, the trade union finally released the text of its deal, nine days after publicly announcing an “in principle” agreement with the government. Within a short time of the release, however, the AEU’s web site went down, due to “the site owner reaching his/her bandwidth limit.” Conveniently for the union, this further delayed teachers from downloading the document.

The union’s attempt to block teachers from seeing what it has signed reflects its utter contempt for teachers and their democratic rights. The union knows that opposition to the sell-out is only going to escalate further as teachers begin to understand precisely what is contained in the agreement.

The AEU is seeking to suppress all discussion and speedily ram through the agreement. It has organised union delegates’ meetings to ratify the deal—earlier this week encouraging union branches to nominate delegates before anyone in the schools had even seen its contents. Several teachers wrote on the AEU’s Facebook page that their schools had, in protest, refused to nominate delegates until the deal was released. There have been numerous posts from teachers saying that they were quitting the union, or would do so after registering their “no” vote against the agreement.

The union is engaged in a conscious operation against the teachers, as it has done in previous agreements. The carefully managed delegates’ meetings, due to begin on May 6, are aimed at blocking debate and isolating opposition. In 2008, the same mechanism was used to

push through a similarly regressive agreement struck by the AEU with the then state Labor government. Delegates were selected on an arbitrary basis, with some schools not holding branch elections to nominate their delegates. The union’s trusted supporters simply assumed the positions. In other schools, delegates had their vote bound to support the agreement, effectively disenfranchising teachers in schools with the substantial minorities against the deal. Some of the AEU’s loyal delegates dropped their votes in the “yes” box and then left without even bothering to participate in the stage-managed union meeting. Those who voted “no” meanwhile, had to do so with their names and schools recorded for later scrutiny by the union leadership.

The proposed 2013 agreement is even worse than the 2008 deal. This is why from the first moment, the AEU resorted to outright lies to promote it. State secretary Meredith Peace told the media, which amplified the union’s claims, that the agreement marked an “historic achievement” and a “significant win.” This began to be exposed the next day. The 16-20 percent wage rise figure promoted by the AEU was concocted by including annual increment gains that most teachers would have received anyway. The real wage outcome generally involved annual raises of between 2.75 and 3 percent.

Before the text of the agreement became available, the government also made clear it would now enforce school “performance reviews”—to which the AEU agreed in the 2001 enterprise agreement—tying teachers’ previously near-automatic salary increments to student results. This is a new mechanism for bringing in performance pay—again, belying the AEU’s lie that it won a major victory by keeping performance pay out of the agreement.

The text of the 41-page proposed agreement reveals further far-reaching clauses directed at undermining teachers' working conditions, and the public education system as a whole.

Protections in earlier agreements for teachers deemed "excess" to school requirements have been gutted. Previously, excess teachers had priority status for positions in other schools. Now clause 21 (3c) states that they will be forced, after receiving "dedicated redeployment/career transition support," to compete with new graduates and other applicants for a teaching position. If unsuccessful, they will be made redundant after 12 months.

Teachers at public schools with declining student enrolments, due to the deliberate promotion of private schools by federal and state governments, now face having their careers terminated. Schools already go to considerable lengths to avoid employing "excess" teachers, preferring younger teachers who can be paid less and who are more willing to accept insecure work contracts. Under the new agreement, schools could even deliberately employ a large number of recent university graduates in order to then declare as "excess" more experienced teachers.

The AEU's proposed agreement gives the state government other mechanisms to lay off teachers. It adds an entirely new section, covering teachers' "unsatisfactory performance." Existing guidelines governing the treatment of teachers alleged to be "poor performers" will be included in the enterprise agreement for the first time. In addition, there is to be a fast tracked process for sacking teachers—in as little as 13 weeks—if a counselling process aimed at "lifting performance" is deemed unsuccessful.

The AEU claimed that the new measures benefitted teachers because it had "locked in" a "clear process ... help[ing] both the individual and the principal." This is a fraud. The changes give the government further weapons to achieve its goal of sacking 5 percent of the teaching workforce, as outlined in its "New Directions" policy paper released last June. That document said "exiting the lowest performing 5 percent of teachers [more than 2,000]" would be achieved by laying off those deemed to have failed "to demonstrate annual progress towards higher levels of proficiency."

Australian Principals Federation president Chris Cotching hailed the new clauses on "unsatisfactory

performance," declaring that "in the past the process has just dragged on and on and on ... [but] the fact it is now in the agreement rather than just education department policy elevates it to a new status."

Principals will have wide leeway to victimise teachers. A new clause 22 (3c) states for the first time that successful teaching involves "the implementation of government education initiatives and curriculum development." This is aimed against teachers who express any differences with the privatising and pro-business education policies of the state and federal governments.

The proposed agreement should be thrown out by teachers, as the starting point of a political counter-offensive in defence of public education against the federal Labor and state Liberal governments. The critical starting point is for teachers to take their struggle out of the hands of the union.

As the Socialist Equality Party has explained: "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." (See "Reject the Australian Education Union's sellout agreement! For a political offensive of the working class to defend public education")



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