

Australian state government announces “performance pay” school regime

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The Victorian Liberal government has unveiled sweeping new measures targeting school teachers, marking a new stage in the national bipartisan assault against the public education system.

Utilising regressive mechanisms promoted by former state and federal Labor governments, and working hand in hand with the main teaching trade union, the Australian Education Union (AEU), Premier Denis Napthine has moved to impose a mandatory failure rate in teachers’ annual reviews. Each year, between 20 and 40 percent of public school teachers will be arbitrarily declared “underperforming,” denied incremental salary increases and threatened with dismissal under “fast tracking” provisions imposed by the AEU as part of an enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) it negotiated with the government earlier this year.

“Performance” benchmarks will be directly tied to students’ results in the NAPLAN standardised tests that were introduced by the former federal Labor government with the AEU’s support. The new system in Victoria will establish a precedent that other state governments, Labor and Liberal alike, will seek to emulate.

The Napthine government is also imposing “performance” assessments on principals, part of which will rate their success in enforcing the mandated failure rates on teachers in their schools. As principals, the government intends to hire business figures and others who have no training or experience as educators, with the principals’ selection process removed from the hands of local school councils. Education department officials have declared that the current crop of teachers do not possess the required “calibre or quality” to fill the 260 principal vacancies next year. The government aims to ensure there is no resistance to its agenda from principals, most of whom are former teachers and well understand the destructive consequences that will accompany the “performance” regime.

The state government’s agenda is aimed at scapegoating teachers for the crisis of public education, dividing teachers against each other and accelerating the shift of students into private schools. This agenda involves narrowing the curriculum to address business demands for a more “productive” workforce, and cutting education funding by slashing teacher numbers, suppressing salaries and closing “underperforming” schools, especially in working-class areas.

Each of these aims is backed by the Labor Party. Former Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s “Better Schools” funding plan (“Gonski”) was based on imposing annual “performance reviews” on teachers, and giving “more power” to principals, including “hiring staff and controlling the budget.” This was modelled on the attacks on public education launched in the US, Britain and other countries. Gillard declared last year when unveiling the plan: “Business leaders tell me about skill shortages today and how the future will demand higher and higher skill levels... our businesses will be unable to compete if our children’s education keeps falling behind.”

The Victorian government is at the forefront of the bipartisan drive to tie “performance” benchmarks to standardised literacy and numeracy tests.

Every year, teachers will receive a score from one to five, with a rating of three or above making them eligible to progress up the salary scale. A lower ranking will mean that the teacher will face the threat of being declared incompetent. Education Minister Peter Hall declared that in a typical school, only 60-80 percent of teachers will receive a “successful performance assessment,” because “only 70 percent of our students are achieving good learning growth each year,” as measured by NAPLAN.

The AEU is an active partner in this offensive. The union gave a green light to the government earlier this year when the three-year EBA covering teachers’ wages and conditions was rammed through.

In April, after public school teachers waged an 18-month industrial campaign that included three one-day strikes and mass meetings, the AEU announced a “historic achievement.” It told teachers that they had won a 16-20 percent wage rise with no productivity offsets. When the text of the agreement was finally released—more than a week after the deal was publicly announced—it became clear that the union bureaucracy was lying. Salary gains in fact amounted to between 2.75 and 3 percent, employment protections for teachers deemed “excess” to a school’s requirements were gutted, and “underperforming” teachers could be sacked in as little as 13 weeks.

The government had made no secret of its punitive plans. It released a series of policy papers last year, proposing to sack 5 percent of the state’s teaching workforce—more than 2,000 teachers—as “underperformers” and introduce “flexible” work and employment arrangements, including the recruitment of business leaders to schools. When the EBA deal was announced, the education minister declared that in the future, teachers’ progression up the salary scale would be based on “rigorous assessment of performance.” He added that he expected many teachers to be promoted each year—but “perhaps not the great majority.”

The government is utilising provisions that were negotiated by its Labor predecessor and the AEU in 2001, which tie teachers’ annual incremental gains “to improvements in student learning.” Up to now, this has been largely unenforced, with 99 percent of teachers moving up the salary scale each year.

The AEU did everything it could to prevent teachers from understanding the implications of the government’s moves during the EBA discussions. It suppressed discussion at the mass meetings convened during the industrial dispute. In particular, the union blocked members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party, who were alone in exposing what was being prepared and in calling for teachers to wage a counter-offensive.

Following the announcement of the government-union deal, the bureaucracy brazenly denied that any change would be made to teachers’ annual salary gains. On its Facebook page, the AEU declared: “Let’s quash this one quickly: There is NO CHANGE to the way staff will increment under this agreement.”

This lie was backed by the Teachers and Education Support Staff Alliance (TESA), a faction within the union led by the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance. While posturing as an opponent of the AEU

leadership and the final agreement, TESA served as the accomplice of the union bureaucracy. When the sellout agreement was released, Socialist Alternative’s Manolya Moustafa declared that the “good news” was that “we beat back performance pay!”

The AEU has now launched a legal challenge to the “performance” benchmarks, on the grounds that the education department failed to “notify and consult principals, teachers and education support staff about what is major systemic change, as required by the Fair Work Act.” This is a cynical manoeuvre aimed at providing the union with some political cover, amid bitter anger among teachers.

The union would welcome any opportunity to work even more closely with the government, through additional “consultation” mechanisms. On Sunday, Naphthine said he would suspend work on the roll out of the new measures until November 8, pending discussions with the AEU.

Teachers cannot take a single step forward in defence of their interests and the public education system within the framework of the AEU. The union is the critical mechanism through which the dictates of the federal and state governments, and the corporate and financial elites behind them, are being enforced.

The starting point of a fight to defend public education is the formation of rank and file committees, independent of the union, in every school and community to mobilise teachers, education staff, principals, parents and students, and turn to other sections of workers facing similar attacks. This requires a new political perspective, based on the struggle for a workers’ government and socialist policies, including the right to free, high quality education for all.



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