

Australian Education Union agrees to sell-out deal with Victorian state Labor government

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30 March 2017

Last Thursday, the Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU) signed off on a new salary and working conditions agreement for teachers, principals and education support staff. The “in principle” Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA), struck with the Andrews’ state Labor government, has once again been stitched up behind teachers’ backs, without even the pretext of consultation or industrial action. Predictably, it is yet another sell-out deal, and follows 12 months of backdoor negotiations between the AEU and the government.

Before teachers had the opportunity to read—or even see—the 50-page document, let alone participate in discussions or mass meetings to review and debate its contents, AEU president Meredith Peace told the media that the deal would address “crushing workloads” and described it as “a great win for our members.”

Peace’s claims are an utter fraud. Like the 2013 EBA, when she trumpeted the achievement of a “historic gain” via the media to union members, she has united with the government and the corporate press to ram through another monstrous betrayal of public school teachers, their students and parents.

The union is fully aware that conditions in the state’s public schools are reaching the breaking point. This has been overwhelmingly demonstrated in union surveys, with input from thousands of teachers and at a recent series of well-attended regional meetings. Teachers have emphasised that workload is the key priority, along with insecure contract teaching, and have made crystal clear that they are willing to fight the government over these issues.

In 2013 during the 2013 EBA process, teachers throughout Victoria attended three of the largest statewide strikes and mass meetings in history. Peace and the other bureaucrats know that the extent of anger

and pent-up hostility that currently exists to the impact of the AEU’s past betrayals could see any mass meetings or strikes break out of the union’s control. That is why Peace made her announcement just a few days before the term break. The union has already decided that no action will be organised, apart from two weeks of delegates meetings beginning on May 1, nine in the metropolitan centre of Melbourne and 21 in country and regional areas. This will be followed by a secret ballot.

The same bureaucratic, anti-democratic tactics were utilised by the NSW Teachers Federation—an affiliate of the AEU in the state of New South Wales—last December, when it rammed through a new salaries and conditions agreement in a one hour meeting. With teachers having no opportunity to read the agreement, the union handed them, instead, its own five-point “summary,” and expected them to vote on it in hundreds of separate meetings spread across the state.

At these meetings, the bureaucrats claimed the deal with the NSW Liberal government contained no erosion of conditions. In reality, the union had already signed off on the reintroduction of inspectors into public schools, after their absence for 40 years—a product of major struggles by teachers in the 1970s against the inspector regime.

Moreover, prior to the meetings, the union also agreed to the introduction of a new “Bump It Up” program, aimed at intensified NAPLAN testing of year 9 students under conditions where any student who failed the tests, would be barred from entering years 11 and 12—the final years of high school (see: “NSW Teachers Federation pushes through new agreement in anti-democratic meetings”).

The new Victorian AEU deal contains no decline in face-to-face teaching time, which has become the key

issue for teachers. At present, they are working, on average, 14–15 unpaid hours per week in excess of their scheduled hours.

Instead of fewer hours, the union has claimed as an “improvement,” four “professional practice days” per year (one day, or 7.5 hours per term), but 30 extra paid hours per year is an insult to the grossly overworked and underpaid teachers. Moreover, beginning in 2018, they will have to be negotiated with the principal and be “consistent with department priorities.”

Last year, an AEU survey of over 13,000 union members indicated that full-time primary teachers averaged 52.8 hours per week and full-time secondary teachers 53.2 hours per week. Leading teachers averaged 55 hours per week and school principals more than 60. Forty-one hours were spent on teaching and related tasks and another 11 on other duties, administration and after school meetings. Eighty percent of teachers described their working hours as “out of control,” leading to a decline in mental health and impacting on overall student learning.

To reduce teacher workloads, the government would have to employ extra staff and create smaller class sizes, something it has refused to do, with the union’s fawning acquiescence.

The AEU’s other negotiated “improvement”—securing ongoing employment for thousands of teachers and ES staff currently on contracts—remains unsubstantiated and undetailed in the EBA. A recent report revealed that 22 percent of teachers and 40 percent of education support staff are being forced to work on short-term contracts, with numbers rising all the time.

As for wages, the AEU’s deal of a 3.25 percent wage rise for teachers and 4 percent for principals, falls well short of its own demand for a 21 percent catch-up increase. Once again, it has simply caved in to the government.

The union has had some successes, however, in its negotiations with the government. The latter has agreed that the union should become even further entrenched in public schools, and in the education department itself, as a government policing agency. The AEU will now be present during all induction processes for new employees; union representatives on local consultative committees will be given 16 hours of time release per year; union state councillors will be given two days

paid leave per term to attend council meetings, and any employee nominated by the union to attend a union training course will be given five paid days per year.



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