

Australian teachers' agreement: The reality behind union "victory" claims

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An in-principle four-year industrial agreement covering public school teachers in the state of Victoria marks another sell-out deal organised by the Australian Education Union (AEU).

Worked out last month with the state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews, after twelve months of back-door negotiations, the deal saw the union call off planned industrial action by teachers before it even began. Unlike previous industrial agreements, this one has been finalised without any strike action or mass meeting of teachers. The union aims to prevent any discussion among teachers and ram through the agreement by lying about its contents and claiming it represents a "win" for teachers.

In reality, on every key issue confronting school staff, the AEU and government have worked together to entrench and deepen the assault on the public education system.

Excessive teacher workload will continue, leading to increased teacher stress impacting on overall student learning

Meredith Peace, president of the Victorian branch of the AEU, claims that the agreement addresses "crushing workload" by giving teachers four "Professional Practice Days" a year, supposedly allowing them to catch up with out-of-classroom work while a relief teacher covers their classes.

In the lead-up to the sell-out deal, the union reported that negotiations had hit a sticking point over workload, and were preparing to strike over the issue. Before the ballot for industrial action had even begun, the union announced a "win" on the basis of the new Professional Practice Days. The new measure does not, however, even begin to address intense workload pressures.

Teachers are already working on average 15 hours of unpaid overtime *each week*. The union's claims that 7.5 hours time-release *each term* will resolve the situation is a cynical joke.

The agreement makes no change to face-to-face teaching time, class sizes, nor will it see any extra teachers employed in schools. As the agreement states, the one day release per term from scheduled duties must be negotiated with the

principal and be in line with "department and school priorities." In other words, it remains unclear whether teachers will be able to use their day each term to carry out work that would be of benefit to them and their students.

Insecure employment and contract teaching will continue

In an AEU statement to members, Peace claimed that changes to contract processes will see "thousands of teachers and ES [Education Support] automatically translate to ongoing employment." Minister of Education James Merlino stated that at least "2,500 teachers and 5,000 Education Support staff would be given certainty moving them from contract to permanent roles."

In fact, secure employment for contract teachers is not guaranteed in the agreement, and the government has since admitted that the numbers of new permanent roles are merely Department of Education "estimates." The AEU deal retains explicit statements contained in previous agreements endorsing contracts as "continu[ing] to be necessary."

The new proposed agreement states that schools "will offer ongoing employment" to eligible teachers, whereas the previous agreement stated that schools "should" offer it. This change in wording, however, will not alter the widespread use of contracts in public schools. Previous sweeping loop-holes that principals have used to avoid transferring contract teachers onto ongoing positions, such as "the employer having good reason" not to, or "predicted declining enrolments" for a school, remain. One in five of all teachers are now on contracts, with 65 percent of graduate teachers on short term contracts in their first five years.

Insecure employment for underpaid Education Support staff will also continue

In a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) information sheet, the AEU states that Education Support (ES) staff that are linked to the Student Support Program (SSP) will be converted into ongoing positions. Student support funding is attached to students with disabilities, and other students requiring additional needs. Presently more than 45 percent of

ES staff are on contract.

Again, the devil is in the detail for this supposed “win.” The proposed agreement details that if a student on the SSP leaves the school, or his or her funding is cut, then the ES staff member attached to that student will be dismissed, though now with 12 weeks’ notice rather than 10. Fewer and fewer ES staff are linked to the Student Support Program, with the government continually raising the threshold to either maintain or gain funding for students with additional needs. ES staff will continue to be grossly underpaid and face onerous working conditions, such as being compelled to work five hours straight without any break.

Real wage cuts continue , with Victorian teachers the lowest paid nationally

In a FAQ information sheet, the union states that teachers and ES staff have secured a 3.25 percent annual salary increase with an “increase of 13.7 percent over the course of the agreement.”

This falls far short of the initial 21 percent catch-up increase included in the initial log of claims. The last time Victorian teachers had a wage increase was in October 2015, and under the new agreement the next will be in April 2017. The deal provides no back pay, therefore equating to a wage freeze for more than one year. Victorian teachers will remain at or near the bottom of the wage scale compared with other states. This coincides with Victoria remaining the lowest state for government funding for schools per student, funded at \$2,253 less than the national average.

Teacher “performance” monitoring processes will deepen

As with all previous industrial agreements, the union has agreed to government dictates that seek to tie teachers’ “performance” to education department criteria, school priorities and student data, creating the framework for so-called “performance pay” and targeted layoffs.

The proposed agreement deepens this process. As part of a list of union-government “commitments,” the AEU has signed off on electronically-managed and online “performance and development reviews.” Performance reviews were previously discussed and signed off on at the school level, but now the government will have the ability to monitor them centrally.

Another commitment includes a sweeping pledge by the AEU to the “implementation of the [government’s] education reform agenda and contribution to achieving targets.”

A new teaching category has also been created, “Learning Specialists.” In addition to “modelling exemplary teaching practice,” they will use data for “whole school improvement,” and develop “protocols of teacher observation, practice and feedback.” This initiative was first

proposed by the AEU, which is effectively seeking to have classroom observations embedded in the industrial agreement. This follows the previous agreement where the union added a new clause allowing teachers’ accused of “unsatisfactory performance” to be sacked within 13 weeks.

AEU rewarded for its sell-out

As a result of its latest betrayal, the union has further entrenched its privileged position within the public education system. Union representatives will now be present during all induction processes for new school 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, and any employee nominated by the union to attend a union training course will be given five paid days per year.

Whereas the union stands to gain from the proposed agreement, teaching and other school staff, students, and the public education system as a whole, will be worse off if it is rammed through.

Teachers should vote “no” to the rotten deal, as the starting point for a coordinated political campaign in defense of the public education system as a whole and for the rights and conditions of teachers and school staff within that system.

Such a fight cannot be undertaken through the AEU. Across the country, the teachers’ unions have helped impose the following “education reforms”: NAPLAN standardised testing, My School, school “autonomy,” a new Year One phonics test, so-called performance reviews, and now the reintroduction of school inspectors in New South Wales some 40 years after their abolition.

Teachers should form rank-and-file committees within every school, uniting teachers, students, families, and other layers of the working class across the country facing similar attacks on their jobs, wages, and working conditions. We urge workers and young people to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* to discuss how to advance this political struggle.



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