

Australian pseudo-left groups back teachers' union after sell-out deal

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Since the Australian Education Union (AEU) announced yet another sell-out industrial agreement covering public school teachers in the state of Victoria, various pseudo-left organisations have rushed to the defence of the union bureaucracy.

The in-principle deal announced last month by the AEU and the state Labor government entrenched previous workplace concessions, imposed another effective real wage cut, maintained the exploitation of contract teachers and education support staff, and did nothing to resolve the workload pressures on classroom teachers that see them working an average of 15 hours unpaid overtime every week (see: “Australian teachers’ agreement: The reality behind union ‘victory’ claims”).

Above all, the deal is aimed at preventing school staff from having any opportunity to collectively discuss the public education crisis and the need for a political counter-offensive against the entire political establishment. The AEU called off planned industrial action before it began, and plans to ram through the agreement without any mass meetings.

Within the AEU, the pseudo-left groups function as active accomplices of the union apparatus, and through it, of the state Labor government.

Several members of Socialist Alliance, Socialist Alternative and Solidarity are on the AEU State Council. This body meets eight times a year and comprises about 120 elected delegates. According to the union web site, it “develops policies and campaigns in between annual branch conferences.” The State Council is also consulted on the closed-doors negotiations between the AEU leadership and the state government.

In November 2012, during discussions preceding the release of the previous industrial agreement, the pseudo-lefts’ Teachers and Education Support Alliance

(TESA) faction made public the union’s preparations to allow greater government leeway to sack “excess” teachers. TESA quickly fell into line following a complaint from the union leadership of a breach in its “confidentiality commitment” with the government. No such complaints were required this time—the pseudo-lefts said and did nothing while the AEU stitched up its latest betrayal with the government.

Pronouncements from different pseudo-left members that they voted against the proposed agreement when it was tabled in the State Council for ratification, and that they now call for a “no” vote in the state-wide ballot, amount to nothing more than cynical posturing.

A statement on the latest AEU deal, posted on the TESA web site, was authored by Steven Adams, a member of the State Council.

“Even someone who is as critical as me has to admit that the proposed agreement has a number of gains across a number of areas,” Adams declares, adding that he “will let the AEU leadership outline these.” He later states that the deal “is certainly not an agreement where we have gone backwards.” He concludes: “My belief is that a strong Union vigorously debates issues and then stands together. The intention of this document is not to create division within the AEU but to inform debate.”

Adams does not wish to create division between the union bureaucracy and the pseudo-lefts precisely because there is no division. His minor criticisms of the agreement directly assist the AEU leadership by covering up the fact that there are no “gains” in the rotten deal for the overwhelming majority of teachers.

This is again clear in the response to the AEU sell-out from Socialist Alternative, a middle-class protest organisation that has close relations with the International Socialist Organization (ISO) in the US.

It has likewise sought to promote the AEU’s lies that

teachers stand to make “gains” from the proposed agreement. An article posted on Socialist Alternative’s web site on March 28, “Missed opportunity to tackle teacher workloads in Vic deal,” was authored by Tess Lee Ack and Manolya Moustafa, the latter another member of the AEU State Council.

The article begins by declaring that “teachers and school support staff stand to make fairly modest gains in the new industrial agreement between the Australian Education Union and the Labor government.”

Its description of these so-called gains points to the material interests that unite the union bureaucracy and the pseudo-left tendencies. Like their counterparts internationally, the pseudo-left organisations in Australia represent a layer of the affluent upper-middle class, including privileged trade union functionaries.

Ack and Moustafa declare that “welcome initiatives” in the AEU deal included “some time release for AEU reps [and] union training leave for all members.” They could have added several other rewards provided to the AEU by the government as payment for services rendered—including union representatives now being present for induction processes for new school employees and two days’ paid leave provided each term for State Council members, with the latter measure directly benefitting pseudo-left members of the council.

The pseudo-lefts back the agreement, because, like the AEU, they stand to gain from it, while the working and living conditions of ordinary public school teachers and their students continue to decline. It allows the entire union apparatus from top to bottom to strengthen its position in the schools.

The pseudo-left groups’ reluctance to openly call for a “yes” vote on the agreement only reflects their calculations that a “left” political safety valve is needed to divert the hostility of teachers to the AEU.

Socialist Alternative is posturing as a supporter of “militant” action, concluding its article on the teachers’ deal by stating: “[W]e could have done much better if we’d proceeded with an industrial campaign, including strikes.” What is proposed, however, is entirely within the union framework and thus doomed from the outset.

Ack and Moustafa declare that “it will be another four years before we can address the workload issue again.” In other words, teachers can do nothing to address the crisis within public schools outside the

AEU’s scheduled enterprise bargaining negotiating periods.

The pseudo-lefts ultimately aim to come to the head of the AEU bureaucracy and themselves impose the cuts demanded by state and federal governments. This is precisely what Socialist Alternative co-thinkers have done in the US, with multiple Chicago school closures enforced by the ISO .

Teachers in Victoria can secure decent pay and conditions only as part of a broader struggle by the working class to defend public education. That requires a complete break with the AEU and the formation of independent rank-and-file committees in every school, mobilising teachers, students, families and other sections of the working class in a political fight against the state and federal governments.

Such a struggle can advance only on the basis of a socialist perspective and the fight for a workers’ government that will reconstruct society to meet basic social needs, including high quality, free education and decent pay and conditions for teachers, not the profits of a wealthy few. The Socialist Equality Party is the sole political tendency fighting for this perspective, and we urge teachers and other workers to contact us for discussion.



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