

Australia: Victorian teachers denounce union-backed agreement

Our reporters
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Public school teachers in Victoria have denounced the in-principle agreement proposed last month between the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the state Labor government. The deal is the latest in a series of trade union sell-outs that deepen the assault on public education.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in its analysis, the agreement, which imposes an effective one-year wage freeze, does nothing to address enormous workloads imposed on teachers, the proliferation of insecure contract positions or the conditions of highly underpaid Education Support (ES) staff. Teacher “performance” monitoring, which is tied to the standardised NAPLAN testing regime introduced under the former federal Labor government, will intensify.

The AEU has sought to suppress debate on the sell-out, while falsely claiming it constitutes a “victory” for teachers. The agreement was released about a week before the term break in order to obstruct discussion among teachers and, unlike previous deals, it was finalised without any mass meeting or industrial action.

Determined to prevent any discussion, the AEU has deleted posts to its Facebook page exposing the sellout and linking to the *World Socialist Web Site*’s examination of the agreement.

Despite this, many teachers have posted comments angrily rejecting the union’s claims that the creation of four student-free Professional Practise Days per year represents a workload reduction. These days, which can be used only for tasks approved by the school principal, are an insult to the thousands of teachers who work an average 15 hours of unpaid overtime *every week*. Teachers also disputed the union’s claim that contract teachers will be offered greater security.

On Facebook, one teacher declared: “What disappoints me the most is that the union always exaggerates the positives within the proposed agreements I’ve [witnessed]. The fine print reveals the true details, and it’s a letdown. Probably a ‘no’ here. Now, back to work at 8.30pm, part of a still unaddressed workload—despite what has been suggested.

And still being on a contract, year after year, something that this agreement won’t change—despite what has been suggested.”

Another added: “Yep. Bulls--t. Read the actual point in the agreement. The school admin can make us do [professional development], peer observation, all the other crap that takes us away from our core business. This is not reducing our workload! Screwed again by this hopeless union. I’m out. The \$700 a year AEU fees can pay for some massages to keep me sane as a teacher with a crap union.”

“I think we get conned every time,” said a third teacher. “I think workload reduction is a load of bulls--t along with the pay increases. If you keep giving us every damn social issue to fix no wonder we are exhausted... The other shocker is the amount for [casual relief teacher] pay. I will be voting NO as well.”

Another teacher commented on the AEU’s Facebook page: “Reading through the agreement it doesn’t appear to reduce workload, only reduced face-to-face teaching time would do that, which isn’t provided for. The [Professional Practise] Days are very much at the mercy of the Principal.”

Other teachers spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Amanda, a primary teacher of 17 years, said: “I have read the agreement and I can’t see anything that alleviates our workload... We need more staff in schools, more teachers, more support staff—it’s that simple.

“The government keeps cutting back support staff and everything is falling back on the classroom teachers. In the past, we had support from psychologists, speech therapists and support teachers. I’ve contacted the union about these problems and they said they were not able to deal with that. They’re not giving us any support on this.”

She added: “The decision to have no mass meetings seems to me that they don’t want people to carefully think the deal through—that the union is in cahoots with the government. They sign-off on an in-principle agreement, but what about our right to fight for more? Why are we accepting the government’s deal?

“I think the ongoing process of just going to delegates

meetings is appalling. I think teachers need to read and carefully discuss what is in the agreement. When I first heard about the in-principle agreement I looked straight away on the union's Facebook page and some people were saying how great it was. I'm not sure how they could say that when we hadn't even got the agreement. I think the wool is being pulled over our eyes."

"The deal seems good for the government. It has saved money and the union seems to have made some gains too. I read that union reps at the schools on the local consultative committee get 16-hours' time release per year, but what about time release for teachers? We don't get anything.

"Since NAPLAN all we seem to be following is standardised testing, like in Britain and the US. It's harming our children. Some teachers are being forced to teach to the test, narrowing the curriculum. The emphasis is on English and Maths and not on developing the whole child."

Rob, a secondary teacher, said: "The government has a good deal. They didn't give us much money or lower our teaching time. I have an enormous workload with four VCE [Victorian Certificate of Education] classes. I have a pile of SACs [School Assessed Coursework] to mark each weekend. I spend about 4 to 5 hours per weekend and on holidays at least 8 hours. The day off will result in more work. If I had time off to do moderation that would be worthwhile.

"I'll be voting no. I've voted against all the recent agreements, as have all our delegates from my school, but the vote seems to come out for the agreement at the delegates meeting."

Two education support staff in high schools, Jessie and Asa, opposed the super-exploitative conditions for ES workers.

Jessie said: "I haven't seen any changes in my conditions for the last five to six years. I feel that we work so hard and never get any recognition, either financially or in any other manner. There are some instances where we have to deal with autism combined with anger issues. We can be placed in physically dangerous situations...

"I'm on the top of my scale and my wage is \$600 per week. I can't support my family on that. I have to work two jobs. I work 30 hours per week at school and I work a 10-hour shift during the week to supplement my wage. The AEU is useless. They don't act on anything. The only time I see them is to pay their dues."

Asa said: "One of the things that concerns me is contracts, but it's not in the agreement. Everyone says that you can only have three contracts, but what happens after that? I'm on my second one-year contract after June."

Erin described the conditions for young teachers like herself, many of whom are forced to work on insecure

contracts.

"This is my fifth year as a teacher," she explained. "I've done three years as an emergency teacher at one school, starting in 2013, and this is my second year full-time there. One third of the teaching force at my school are on contracts. This year I stay 'til about 6.30 p.m. most nights, an average of 50–60 hours a week.

"I cried at school sometimes. Last year, I wanted to quit teaching. I was so incredibly anxious for most of the year. I felt really incompetent, because I felt I couldn't stay on top of the workload... I would stay back at work till 8 p.m. most weeknights and sometimes until 9 p.m. or 10 p.m. When I was at school I would be taking care of those extra Roles and Responsibilities or planning and assessing."

The Socialist Equality Party is calling for a "no" vote to the AEU deal. This must be the starting point for a broader fight—mobilising teachers and other sections of the working class nationally—to defend public education, along with other social rights of the working class.

This struggle requires a break from the union, which has worked to subordinate teachers to the Labor Party and its reactionary standardised testing and education "reform" agenda. Genuinely representative rank-and-file committees must be formed at every school to take forward this struggle.

The critical issue is building a new leadership in the working class that will fight for a workers' government based on socialist policies, including high-quality, free public education at all levels.

We urge teachers to contact us to discuss how this struggle can be taken forward.



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