

The political issues in the fight to reject the Victorian teachers' EBA

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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Anger is growing among teachers and Education Support (ES) staff in Victoria as they become aware of the real content of the four-year Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) struck between the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the state Labor government.

The Socialist Equality Party has spoken with, or received emails or Facebook comments from, dozens of teachers denouncing the EBA. Contrary to the claims by the AEU that the agreement delivers “significant improvements,” it will impose a 12-month wage freeze and provides only cosmetic relief from the 53 hours that the average teacher is now working. It gives no guarantees of secure employment to the thousands of teachers and ES staff languishing on short-term contracts. Yet, the AEU is seeking to get the agreement ratified without any genuine discussion or mass meetings, while bureaucratically censoring expressions of opposition. There is a clear relationship between the anti-democratic measures of the AEU apparatus and the regressive content of the agreement.

The most detrimental, long-term aspect of the Victorian EBA is that it includes sweeping new commitments by the AEU to enforce a performance system tied to education department criteria, school priorities and student data. In other words, standardised testing such as NAPLAN. Introduced by the federal Labor government in 2009–2010, and modelled on comparable schemes in the United States and the United Kingdom, the overriding objective of performance-ranking and related “school autonomy” is to cut spending. Education for most students is being dumbed down to comprise what is pragmatically determined to be necessary as far as the major employers are concerned. At the same time, an ever-growing proportion of the teaching workforce is being driven into contract employment with 40 percent of graduate teachers leaving the profession in the first 5 years.

Performance-ranking is setting the stage for an even more brutal assault on teachers and on the public education system as a whole. In the US, hundreds of schools have been classified as “failing” and handed over to private “charter” operators, who receive block grants and then extract profits by cutting costs on every conceivable overhead. Tens of thousands of full-time teaching jobs have been destroyed and replaced with lower-paid contract positions. With the appointment of Betsy DeVos

as education secretary in the US—a longstanding and virulent opponent of public education—the charter agenda is expected to drastically accelerate.

Right-wing bodies in Australia, such as the Institute for Public Affairs, have hailed DeVos’s appointment and are agitating for the wholesale introduction of charter schools. They are using the alleged “flat-lining” of NAPLAN results and a decline in the “international ranking” of Australian education to argue their case.

The sentiment among Victorian teachers—that their interests and rights are being trampled on by both their employer and the union—is shared by millions of workers in other industries, across Australia and around the world. Decades of restructuring to achieve “international competitiveness,” or “a regime of continuous improvement” in the case of education, has led to a vast decline in the conditions of the working class and unprecedented levels of wealth and income inequality.

Every teacher knows that there is an ever-widening gap between the private education that the wealthy can buy, and the under-resourced and increasingly narrow public education that is available to working class youth.

The same class divide affects every aspect of life, from access to culture, to housing, child care, health services and aged care. By 2015, the richest 10 percent of Australian households controlled as much as 55 percent of the national wealth, while the poorest 40 percent owned virtually nothing. Australia, a recent report estimated, is one of the five most unequal countries among so-called developed economies (see: “Report reveals, for the first time, extent of wealth inequality in Australia”).

Every work day, teachers and ES staff at hundreds of working class schools confront the psychological and physical impact on their students of the financial and other stresses afflicting their parents. A growing number of students come from officially recognised “poor” households. The definition of “poverty,” however, does not encompass the millions of working class families who struggle each month to meet mortgage payments and other bills.

With the destruction of vast swathes of once well-paid, full-time jobs, a generation of youth knows it has a bleak future. Nearly 50 percent of the Australian workforce has been reduced

to casual, contract or part-time employment. Add to that the awareness among young people of the international dangers of war and the absence of any credible action on issues such as climate change and the pandemic of mental health problems, and teachers are being left to deal, in their classrooms, with explosive social antagonisms and crises.

How can teachers effectively educate and inspire children in such an atmosphere? Many are struggling themselves under the stresses of short-term contracts, sub-standard pay and the constant pressure of “performance” reviews. They face a union that is not just indifferent, but actively collaborating in the imposition of such conditions.

Many teachers are bitter and hostile toward the AEU. What is not widely understood, however, is that the perfidy of the union is not the outcome of cowardice or corruption on the part of its current leadership. Rather, it is the outcome of the fact that trade unionism accepts the capitalist profit system and all that flows from it. With the advent of globalised production, which enables transnational banks and corporations to transfer investment and entire industries both between and within countries, every capitalist state is objectively compelled to provide “competitive” tax rates and labour conditions. The steady reduction in taxation on corporate profit and income over the past three-and-half decades has propelled the endless attempt to curb or cut public spending—whether on education, health, social services or infrastructure.

The pro-capitalist trade unions, in every country, have transformed, under the impact of globalised production, from organisations that sought limited workplace and social reforms, into industrial police forces that seek to deliver “international competitiveness” at the expense of the working class.

This process has vastly intensified since the 2007–2008 financial crisis and the ensuing stagnation within the global economy. Behind the scenes, the Australian corporate and political establishment is preoccupied with discussing how to slash federal and state budgets, while channelling an even greater share of national income to the military, corporate profits and the rich. Whether represented by the Coalition, Labor, or other parties, the agenda of the Australian ruling elite is war and militarism around the world, alongside its US ally, and austerity and class war against the working class at home.

The lesson that must be drawn by workers from their decades of bitter experiences is that the unions will collaborate with the ruling elites and seek to block and dissipate any signs of opposition.

Members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party, who work in the public education sector, are actively campaigning for Victorian teachers and ES staff to vote “NO” in the secret ballot that will take place in May on the proposed EBA. They have established a Facebook page, “Teachers Against the Victorian Education Agreement,” to provide a forum for discussion and debate.

The rejection of the EBA is a necessary step, in opposing the

sell-out deal, however it will not immediately change the situation that teachers and students confront. The AEU will simply re-enter sordid negotiations with the Labor government. It may even call work-stoppages or strikes and protest rallies to let off steam, and declare that it is fighting for a better deal. The union’s aim, however, will not change. It will seek to pressure teachers into endorsing an agreement that accepts the subordination of public education to corporate requirements and the budget dictates of the state and federal governments.

Immediately, teachers and ES staff need to set about creating new, independent organisations of struggle.

The SEP advocates the formation of democratic, rank-and-file committees at each school, which actively seek to mobilise parents and students in a rebellion against NAPLAN testing and performance ranking, the substandard state of facilities and resources at many public schools and the unacceptable working hours, pay and conditions being forced on teachers.

Such a struggle for education rights, however, must be a conscious political one, and explicitly linked to the broader mobilisation of the entire working class to achieve all its social rights. It will necessarily require coordinated, unified action by workers across state and national borders to take economic and political power out of the hands of the tiny capitalist oligarchy. The resources to meet the needs of masses of people on a world scale—including high quality education—can be acquired only by placing the banks and financial institutions, as well as the major corporations, under public ownership and the democratic control of workers’ governments, as part of the overall socialist reorganisation of society.

The socialist perspective of the SEP is dismissed by some as “unrealistic.” The most unrealistic perspective, however, is one that claims education or any other right can be defended within the framework of the failed capitalist order, the breakdown of the façade of democracy, rising international tensions and the danger of war.

The SEP urges teachers and ES staff who agree with our program to apply to join our party and world movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Like and follow the “Teachers against the Victorian education agreement” Facebook page.



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