

Australia: Contract teacher voices opposition to the AEU-government agreement

Our reporters
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This is the third of a series of articles containing interviews conducted by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) with Victorian teachers about their conditions and the public education crisis; the recent sell-out deal negotiated by the Australian Education Union (AEU) with the state Labor government, and the campaign being waged by the Socialist Equality Party and its teacher members for teachers to vote “No” in the forthcoming secret ballot on the agreement.

A contract teacher working at a primary school in a Victorian regional centre, who requested to remain anonymous, spoke to the SEP after reading the Teachers and ES against the Victorian Education Agreement Facebook page. She explained that she had found the page “when it popped up on my Facebook.” She said she was already “feeling upset about the agreement” and was also disturbed by the fact that there had been no discussion about the EBA at her school.

The teacher emphasised the immense difficulties associated with being a contract teacher. “To get an ongoing job is very hard,” she remarked. “I’ve been teaching for seven years. At the moment, I’m working term by term. I still have to fill out the selection criteria for each job, even if it’s every term (every three months). I’ve moved so many times that I’ve lost count.

“I estimate that I work on average 60 hours a week. I basically get to school at 7.30 in the morning, and I easily leave at 4.30–5.00 p.m. every day. Then I do a couple of hours at home.”

The primary teacher added that she would do around 10 hours work on weekends, preparing her classes for the next week. “I usually spend the time planning, or for PLT (Professional Learning and Teaching), or for ILP’s (Individual Learning Plans). In most classes, you

usually have around five children with LDD’s (learning difficulties or disabilities) in a class of around 18. As a contract staffer, you are just expected to do all this by yourself and show you can do it. I do get the sense that I’m competing for my job all the time.

“When you’re on contract, you feel the pressure not to whinge or speak up. I find that it’s very difficult to settle down in your life or plan anything. You get to an age where you’re ready to do certain things and plan things, but you can’t. I can’t look at buying a house, because I don’t know how long I’ll be working at a place. So I’m forced to share and keep moving around. You can feel quite isolated.”

She went on to relate her attitude to the current EBA.

“I graduated in 2011. I didn’t know much about the 2013 EBA because I was only new to the system. But when I received the email on this EBA, the very night I received it from the AEU, I read the agreement back to back and I concluded: this is going to mean nothing to me! I was actually excited, thinking this might mean I will be ongoing now. Then I realised it’s not going to happen. This is the main issue for me.

“I feel that if this agreement goes through, there will be no reduction in workload at all. The job security was the main issue for me in this deal and it doesn’t do anything about it.”

She said she had seen on the AEU site that many teachers agreed with her own criticisms of the so-called “four professional days” that the union had negotiated, supposedly to allow teachers more time to prepare classes at school. The reality was, she said, that “they will create more work. At some schools, it will be impossible to negotiate with the principal what you can and can’t take the days for. Some principals will just not allow you to take the days.”

She also raised that when the agreement was first

published on the union's Facebook page, she noticed that every teacher who made a negative comment, or who was against the agreement, was being blocked, or denounced, and their contribution deleted. "I thought at the time, they're supposed to be representing us. Why are they doing that?"

The teacher said that she knew nothing about the new measures contained in the agreement until she started reading the SEP's articles, "including the issue of possible amalgamations. I had read the agreement fully, but not the full extent of what they're doing with this. It wasn't publicised on the AEU site, or in the agreement or anywhere else.

"I also read in those articles on your site about the potential for teachers to be penalised if we don't meet data outcomes, or we could face less certainty in terms of getting ongoing [permanent employment]. That information wasn't available anywhere and I was interested in knowing this. It's impossible to meet some of these outcomes, depending on what school you're at, and if you have difficult students."

She then went on to voice her differences with the standardised testing regime that was initially introduced into public schools by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments. "I really don't like it," she declared, "I feel as though we're teaching to a test, spending the majority of our time preparing on this, and not enough time on building our relationship with our students, and building on their strengths. We're creating kids who can't enjoy education and [who are] just seen in terms of how they perform on a test. It just stresses me out so much because of the pressure we're already under. That this is being used in other countries to get rid of teachers is really distressing, because I can see where education is going.

"If it wasn't for the site that came up on Facebook, I wouldn't have realised the number of teachers against this. I've learnt so much reading about the other teachers from Thornbury, who explained about their situation. I thought I was the only one going through this.

"I think in terms of what governments are spending, like spending more for defence, they aren't putting money into education at all. This is the area that is needed the most and they're completely neglecting it."

Click here to visit and follow the "Teachers and ES Staff Against the Victorian Education Agreement"

Facebook page.



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