

Australia: Teachers explain why the AEU-government deal should be rejected

Our reporters
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This is the fourth in a series of articles containing interviews conducted by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) with Victorian teachers about the public education crisis in their state; 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 a “No” vote in the forthcoming secret ballot on the deal.

Michael, a primary school teacher for 17 years, said that while the union claimed it had addressed workload issues in the agreement, which were becoming increasingly problematic, he did not agree it had. As a classroom teacher, he said, the four-year deal had to address the “day to day workload.”

“If I was given a least one extra hour a week planning time, this would allow me to provide a much higher quality of teaching to my students. I previously worked at a school where we had an extra hour of planning time—it made a huge difference to staff morale, to the type of planning, it was better for student well-being, and allowed time to communicate between school and home. Instead, we have a once-a-term day, and it is not clear how that will work. It will make no difference to stress and the thousands of teachers leaving the profession.

“My job has changed in the last 15 years,” Michael explained. “There are so many more demands made on teachers. Every time the government makes a new demand, there is no thought to the impact on our workload. It would be good if it was recognised that we are working beyond capacity.”

Michael went on to criticise the amount of public money being handed over to the private schools by the government at the direct expense of public education.

“Why aren’t we fighting for freezing the money that is going to the private schools and using it for the public schools? One of the teachers from my school left and went into the private school system. She was getting

seven hours planning time a week at the private school, and we get three hours. Imagine how much planning you could do if we had that time! We could have younger teachers working with older experienced teachers and so much time to assist students. The private schools have a heap of money to do that, we don’t. [Victorian Labor Premier Daniel] Andrews says we are the “Education State.” What a joke!

“Our performance reviews are tied to data. I think the biggest problem with education here and internationally is that they are using data, which might be able to apply in other fields, but is being crudely applied to education.

“What is apparent over the last 10–20 years is a continual focus on things like literacy and maths, at the expense of other areas. Governments are copying the US model of standardised testing and then applying that to teacher performance, school performance and principal performance. Studies have shown that standardised test scores don’t capture everything about a school or students, and they certainly aren’t a measure of teacher effectiveness.

“The AEU always seems to be very co-operative in dealing with Labor governments. Many of the reps are looking to establishing a political career. Given the deal falls way short of our log of claims, why have they been so quick to sign off? The timing of this is highly suspicious, in terms of trying to ram through a yes vote.

Attacking the agreement for its failure to deal with the growing number of contract teachers, as opposed to those with permanency, Michael said, “It is basically the same as the last three agreements ... We will be back here in four years’ time and the figures on contract teaching will be the same.

“I’ve had experience in trying to follow through on the previous agreement, trying to hold the principal to account about contracts and ongoing positions. The principal gave some b...s... reason not to advertise an

ongoing position. We then contacted the union, and the union said, ‘Well, if that is what the principal said, then we have to accept that. That is the best we can do.’

“All this talk about self-regulating and monitoring of contracts, it has not worked in the past and we will have the same. On contracts the agreement is an epic failure.”

Like many other teachers who have spoken to the SEP, Michael raised that he knew of material that had been deleted from the AEU’s Facebook page.

“The moderators of the AEU Facebook don’t need to agree with people who oppose the agreement,” he said. “If comments are seen by the union as baseless, then leave them on the web site, and let AEU members decide for themselves. It reminds me of regimes where there is no democracy.”

Ollie, a secondary teacher, who works in Melbourne’s eastern suburbs, was scathing about the union-government agreement and emphasised that teachers needed to reject it.

“The pay rise is minimal. What the union has done about work conditions is a nonsense. There’s not going to be less work or any relief at all.

“So, we’re worse off, and it needs to be rejected, because over the next 3 to 4 years it will get very much worse within schools for teachers, and therefore for kids. Teachers are under enormous stress.

“All the new teachers come in, they’ve got fees hanging over their heads from the university and they’ve got to re-register with their qualifications and all sorts of certifications with the Department. As well as that they have to start a career usually on a contract rather than permanent employment and ongoing employment. So the union really has become the policeman to enforce these agreements, which sell our conditions down the drain.”

Ollie referred to the high levels of anxiety and stress suffered by teachers, which had an effect in the classroom. He said that students could feel the impact, along with “their own stresses, caused by a future of unemployment or underemployment, climate change, looming wars around the world, insecure incomes and so on, from the massive inequality in society.”

“Schooling,” he declared, “is just becoming a joke. It’s based on all the assessment items of VCE [final Year 12 school examinations] and NAPLAN [standardised testing regime introduced by the former Labor government] and ‘teach to the test.’

“The essence of education: of life and living and learning genuine skills and critical thinking, is being substituted with being ‘work ready.’ And very basic

literacy and numeracy is really all that employers want from the mass of students and the working class.

“Public schools are being underfunded. There’s real inequality between public and private education and there’s a huge shift of government money being transferred to private wealth.

“At the school where I teach, there is a large number, close to a hundred members, of the AEU. We called a meeting, we had an industrial officer come to attend the meeting last week. We had only seven people able to attend, due to people being stressed out and lots of other sorts of meetings they had to attend. The meetings that we’ve had, and discussions around the school, have really shown that, by and large, teachers are probably hostile towards the union. They don’t see a lot of hope in trying to overturn [the agreement] or what else can be done.”

Ollie said he thought something had to be done—“perhaps start some sort of independent discussions within the school. The problem is more than just the agreement. It’s the whole function of the school in society.”

As an example, he raised the problems faced by ES (Education Support) staff. They were little more than low-paid workers, he said, “who undertake difficult and highly skilled jobs for very small reward.

“Often many of them are employed as 0.8 [80 percent of full-time] and on a limited contract basis and, more or less, cannot progress up any scale to get higher salaries or full-time employment.”

They were therefore working on “below poverty wages,” despite being very dedicated to the students they worked with, all of whom had learning or social difficulties. “They do a wonderful job under very poor conditions and this EBA is not going to improve them either.”

Ollie concluded by declaring that the failure of the union to hold mass meetings, allowing “no real time for this discussion before the agreement is accepted, or put to the membership to be ratified,” was “essentially anti-democratic.”

Click here to visit and follow the “Teachers and ES Staff Against the Victorian Education Agreement” Facebook page.



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