Socialist Equality Party forum discusses agenda behind Australian Education Union sell-out deal

Our reporter
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The Socialist Equality Party recently held a teachers' forum in Melbourne, Victoria's capital city, to discuss the regressive agreement negotiated between the Australian Education Union (AEU) and Victorian state Labor government. The deal, which is being put to teachers and education support staff in a secret ballot between June 13 and 20, will exacerbate the crisis in public schools.

Teachers and education staff are already burdened with unprecedented workloads, low wages and growing attacks on permanency, along with untenable levels of stress and anxiety associated with NAPLAN, the standardised testing regime introduced by the Rudd and Gillard federal Labor government in 2008. The deal's remit is to deepen the very pro-market agenda that has produced this crisis.

The SEP is the only political party campaigning for a "no" vote. The pseudo-left organisations, Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance, which have representatives on the AEU's state executive, have maintained a virtual silence on the deal, in contrast to previous years when, in order to provide a "left" cover for the union, they advocated limited protest campaigns. Their complicity with the union in pushing through the deal underscores their rapid shift to the right.

During the past two months, teacher members and supporters of the SEP have campaigned vigorously against the agreement among their colleagues throughout the state, exposing its actual content and ramifications at meetings of delegates and in their own schools, and by posting a regular stream of articles, comments and teacher interviews, as well as a widely viewed video, on Facebook and the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Attending the forum were public and private school teachers, university and high school students and young workers. They listened intently to a comprehensive report on the wider historical and international context of the new agreement by SEP national committee member Sue Phillips, a teacher of more than 30 years' standing.

Phillips emphasised the pro-market, privatisation agenda behind every Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) during the past two decades. This had led, she argued, to "one of the most unequal education systems in the world, with a two-class system—an under-staffed, under-funded, over-crowded, public one for ordinary working-class families, and another, private one, for the rich and privileged."

Due to the resultant crisis in the public system, many parents had felt obligated to send their children to expensive private schools. This decades-long process had led to a situation where a staggering 40 percent of high school students now attended private schools. "The days when public education was free, accessible, and available to all, no longer exist," Phillips declared.

She referred to the massive budget cuts to public education and moves to "for-profit" schools underway in the US, Britain and other countries, and drew out that further such measures were being prepared in Australia. She then reviewed a number of past agreements, dating back to 2003, which had committed to the agenda of "education reform."

The current EBA, Phillips said, continued this process. While never spelled out in detail, this was "an international agenda, driven by corporations, governments and bodies such as the OECD, which established PISA [Program for International Student Assessment] in 2000 to rank country against country and drive the high-stakes testing, performance-based pay agenda."

In 2003, Phillips explained, the Bracks Labor government had enlisted the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), a global management consulting firm and strategic business advisor, to conduct a long-term workforce study, and produce a series of education "Blueprints," to further rationalise the public education system, including by attacking and undermining so-called "underperforming" schools.

The Victorian business model had since become the national "benchmark," establishing the lowest levels of

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funding, and the most devolved school system in Australia. This was, Phillips said, "directly in line with the imposition of the Rudd/Gillard agenda of mandatory national standardised testing.

"In 2011, the New South Wales government followed its Victorian counterpart, engaging BCG to slash $1 billion from its school funding budget."

The education unions, Phillips warned, "are not just bystanders in this process, nor is the problem one of weak leaders, who 'cave-in' under government pressure. They are a central prop for this pro-market agenda, functioning as enforcers whose role is to impose and police it.

"There is a clear relationship between the anti-democratic, bureaucratic tactics employed by the AEU to obtain a majority "yes" vote, and the regressive, pro-market content this agreement."

It was time, Phillips insisted, for teachers and Education Support staff to draw lessons from their experiences. "The unions will collaborate with the financial elites and seek to block and dissipate any signs of opposition. We need to set about creating new, independent organisations of struggle.

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

"Such a struggle for education rights," she concluded, "must be a political one, explicitly linked to the broader mobilisation of the entire working class to achieve all its social rights. The resources to meet the needs of all humanity—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 to meet social need, not private profit."

The report was followed by nearly two hours of animated discussion. Melanie, a primary school teacher, spoke immediately after the report. "There's an increasing spirit in schools that we're really disheartened," she said. "It is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain work-life balance. Even to meet the demands of [after-school] meetings is becoming impossible. We are now being asked to attend more and more meetings per week. We do that because we care about the kids. If we don't get issues addressed quickly, then they're out of our hands, and that's not in the best interest of the children. No teacher is in this job for the money. We're bringing work back home at night. We're tired parents when we get back home.

Referring to the agreement, she pointed out that teachers worked "among children and families who are relying on us, and this agreement takes more of our voice away. I really believe it's worth spreading the word and pushing and continuing to push against what feels like something impossible," she said, and criticised the fact that there had been no genuine consultation with teachers.

Leading SEP member Linda Tenenbaum questioned the meaning, today, of "education." She reviewed how the progressive attitude towards education, championed by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, had been completely repudiated by today's ruling elites. Instead of focusing on stimulating and developing children's physical, emotional, social, creative and intellectual capacities, encouraging curiosity and critical thought, today's "education" emphasises, for the vast majority, rote learning, "teaching to the test" and mind-numbing discipline.

Recent reports indicated, Tenenbaum said, that many young people were deciding not to complete their secondary education because of the levels of stress, anxiety and depression they experienced at school with the testing regime. Moreover, many long-standing and talented teachers were quitting the profession for the same reason. At the same time, a recent editorial in Murdoch's *Australian*, had gone so far as to propose that, for budgetary reasons, working-class youth should abandon any conception of a university education.

Questions and discussion ensued about the rank-and-file committees advocated by the SEP, and the socialist program upon which they would be based; about the transformation of the trade unions into corporate policemen, under conditions of globalisation and "international competition;" and about specific measures in the 2017 EBA.

Before concluding, the forum voted unanimously for a resolution calling on all teachers and ES employees to vote "no" in the secret ballot, and to organise staff meetings, involving both union and non-union staff, to allow for the widest possible discussion, as the first step in a unified political and industrial campaign against the 2017 AEU-state Labor government agreement.

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