

Reject unacceptable workloads and standardised testing! Take a stand for public education!

Vote No to the AEU-Labor government sell-out deal in Victoria!

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
9 June 2017

The Socialist Equality Party calls on all Victorian teachers, Education Support (ES) staff and principals to take a stand against the decades-long assault on public education by voting ‘No’ to the latest sell-out Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA).

The deal, struck between the Australian Education Union (AEU) with the Andrews Labor government, was made behind the backs of the school communities it purports to represent. Since announcing it in the media, the AEU has done everything it possibly can to portray a ‘Yes’ vote as a *fait accompli*, with the secret ballot of all teaching staff, to be held between June 13 and June 20, nothing but a formality.

Teachers and ES staff should not accept this. On the eve of the vote, the Fairfax Media has revealed that up to “half of all Australian teachers are leaving the profession in the first five years.” This is just one of many indices of the staggering crisis afflicting the public education system, not only in Victoria, but throughout Australia and, indeed, most of the world.

Of the 453 teachers surveyed across NSW, “two-thirds identified time management and having too much work as their biggest challenge, and more than half said they wanted more time for collaboration, mentoring and planning.” A NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) representative was quoted as saying that teachers should “have support and more time within the school day for professional learning and collaboration with other teachers.”

Fine words! But only last December, the NSWTF rammed through an agreement with the state Liberal government, which teachers were given no opportunity to read, and which formalised a regime of constant performance monitoring and ever-increasing workload demands, associated with standardised testing (NAPLAN) and the requirement that students achieve ever-higher results.

The NSWTF’s Victorian counterparts in the AEU claim that the deal addresses “crushing workload.” But what is the reality? There will be four new “Professional Practice Days” per year. That means *one per term*! And they will be only at the principal’s discretion and in line with “department and school priorities.” Meanwhile, the EBA will step up the monitoring of teacher and school performance related to NAPLAN; make peer “observations” mandatory, and publish performance reviews online.

Teachers are already working, on average, 15 hours of unpaid overtime *each week*. The union’s claims that 7.5 hours time-release *each term* will resolve the situation is a cynical and contemptuous joke.

Moreover, there will be no change to face-to-face teaching time or class sizes, no extra teachers, and contracts will continue to undermine permanent teaching jobs.

As for wages, under this agreement, Victorian teachers will remain at or near the bottom of the wage scale, compared with their counterparts in other states, while Victoria will continue to boast the lowest government funding for public schools per student—\$2,253 less than the national average.

Recent reports indicate that many secondary public school students are deciding to leave school before Years 11 and 12, because they cannot endure the mental health impacts of standardised testing, namely, record levels of stress, anxiety and depression.

It appears the same is true of public school teachers—and one of the primary reasons for the growing rate of attrition. The chronic underfunding, under-resourcing and under-staffing of public schools is also driving many parents, including those who can ill-afford it, to send their children to private schools. This is not some unfortunate and unintended by-product of successive government-union deals, but a conscious agenda.

The outcome? Some 40 percent of secondary students now attend private schools, while 30 percent of primary students do likewise. There are private schools for the rich—or for those working class families who make major sacrifices to try to provide their children with a well-funded education—and public schools for the rest, the majority of which are dominated by lack of infrastructure, staff, resources and funding.

Teachers and ES staff should ask themselves why, for the first time, the AEU refused to organise mass meetings to report on this particular agreement. This is because the union wants to prevent—not encourage—discussion about its contents and details, and to suppress dissent. Union officials are aware of the oppositional sentiment building up among teachers and ES staff, not to speak of parents and students. That is why, for example, the union eliminated from its Facebook page any postings critical of the current deal. Such an anti-democratic act is testimony to the fact that the AEU’s EBA expresses, not the interests of teachers, but of state and federal governments and their austerity agenda.

This is not just an Australian, but an international phenomenon. Since the global financial crisis of 2007–2008, and the ensuing stagnation in the world economy, the corporate, financial and political establishment has been preoccupied with slashing federal and state

budgets, while channelling a greater share of national income to corporate profits and the rich. The level of social inequality in Australia and globally is rising precipitously. Just eight billionaires own more wealth than the bottom 50 percent of the world's population.

Last month the Trump administration announced budget cuts of \$1.6 trillion to social programs, including health, aged care, alleviating poverty, and more than \$10 billion in cuts to public education. An extra \$500 million, however, was allocated to rapidly burgeoning "charter" schools, many of which are "for-profit." The same privatisation process is underway in Britain and New Zealand and it is certainly occurring here.

The 2017 agreement commits the union to implement open-ended "educational reform." While this remains unexplained in the deal, it is being driven by international bodies, such as the OECD, which established PISA [Program for International Students Assessment] in 2000 to rank country against country and drive high-stakes testing and a performance-based pay agenda. The 2017 deal thus follows from a number of measures, never explained to teachers, implemented by the union and successive state governments in EBAs over the past decade and a half.

These include:

- * In 2001, a new teacher career structure, linking all promotions to "improvements in student learning," monitored by state-wide testing of Maths and English in years 3 and 5—the first step towards re-introducing a performance-based pay structure, previously abolished in 1902.

- * In 2003, the hiring of the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), a global management consulting firm and strategic business advisor, to develop a long-term workforce plan and series of education "Blueprints" to rationalise public education, target "underperformance" and impose a business model, aimed at cutting costs and developing a "regime of continuous improvement."

The union endorsed the "Blueprints" which were embedded in the 2004, 2008, and 2013 agreements.

- * In 2013, the inclusion of a new category: "Unsatisfactory Performance," creating a mechanism for sacking public school teachers. "Priority status" for teachers named "in excess" was removed, requiring them to compete against graduates for their jobs, thus eliminating older and more experienced staff, generally on higher wages. Since 2013, more than 416 teachers have been named "in excess," 363 of them older teachers.

The BCG education model has established Victoria as the national "bench-mark" for low-cost, autonomous schools. Every state government, whether Labor or Liberal, has seamlessly signed on to this process, which has dovetailed neatly with the Rudd/Gillard Labor government's mandatory NAPLAN standardised testing regime.

- * The 2017 agreement introduces another new teacher category, "Learning Specialists." These teachers will use data for "whole school improvement," and develop protocols for "peer observation" into "school long-term planning." They will be promoted, with a new salary of \$100,000 or more, to implement the next stage of the government/union agenda. Peer observations will further drive the performance culture and likely pave the way for introducing the old inspection system, introduced into NSW public schools at the end of 2016.

The source of the 2017 educational reform agenda is the 2016 Bracks review, fully endorsed by the Andrews government. It will further tie school funding to student outcomes and teacher

performance, stepping up so-called school "regeneration," i.e., amalgamations and closures, as well as corporate partnerships, called "Learning Partnerships."

The AEU is no passive bystander in this process. It supports the pro-market agenda and has enforced it from the outset. For services rendered, the 2017 agreement rewards AEU officials and representatives by embedding them into every school operation, including teacher inductions and extra time to attend union "professional development" courses.

Teachers need to carefully consider the AEU's history of betrayals before casting their vote on the 2017 agreement. If the union can railroad through a majority 'Yes' vote, the assault on public schools, leading to further closures and privatisations, will only accelerate.

In calling for a 'No' vote, the SEP emphasises that this is only the first step. What, then, is the way forward? Teachers cannot return to the past. The crisis in education is just one expression of the fundamental incompatibility of the social rights of the working class with the capitalist profit system itself. Capital now ruthlessly scours the globe, seeking ever more lucrative sources of profit from every area of social life. That is why teachers, and all workers, need to make a definitive political break from the pro-capitalist unions and the Labor Party, and begin to develop independent, democratic rank-and-file committees, which will actively fight 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 for teachers.

The struggle for the social right of all teachers, students and parents to a decent, well-funded public education system, must be based on a new, revolutionary socialist perspective, explicitly linked to the broader mobilisation of the entire working class to achieve all its social rights—including decent, well-paid jobs and working conditions, high quality health, housing and aged care. The resources to meet such social needs 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.



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