South Australian teachers strike for better wages and conditions

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4 July 2019

On Monday thousands of teachers and pre-school educators in South Australia took to the streets, striking against deteriorating wages and working conditions in public schools. In Adelaide, the state capital, over 10,000 teachers protested outside the parliament. Similar demonstrations took place in regional centres in Mt Gambier, Whyalla and Point Lincoln.

The strike follows a half day stoppage last November, the first strike by educators for over a decade.

Negotiations between the Marshall Liberal government and the South Australian branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU) have been underway for more than a year, for a new 3-year enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA). With the government refusing to meet any of the union's demands for increased wages, secure employment, lower class sizes, and much needed support staff, teachers voted overwhelmingly last week to take further action.

The strike, which forced the closure of 258 schools, is an expression of growing anger among educators to the pro-business assault, spearheaded for more than a decade by the Weatherill Labor government, in collaboration with the unions, and now intensified by the Marshall Liberal government.

Many educators at the Adelaide rally held hand-made placards expressing their frustration and anger at conditions in their schools. Some read: "Workload Overload," "Some things are extinct, let's not make public education one of them!" "Frazzled, frustrated and fed-up," "Smaller class sizes," "It is students' future we are fighting for."

Responding to the strike last Friday, state treasurer Rob Lucas, declared, "we have made it quite clear no amount of chanting, waving flags and singing… is going to make money magically appear in the budget."

Despite a few well-rehearsed words from Howard Spreadbury, South Australian AEU president, on the steps of the parliament, and months of rhetoric from other union officials about running a "multi-faceted" and "winning approach" to force the government to listen, the campaign has achieved virtually none of the teachers' demands.

Beyond weekly closed-door negotiations with government officials, the union's duplicitous efforts have consisted of a half day stoppage last year, a teacher letter-writing campaign to the education minister, outlining the complexity of working conditions within classrooms, leafleting at some schools and multiple delegations to Labor MPs.

During the rally, Spreadbury signalled once again his willingness to sign off on another sell-out deal. "The government offer wasn't good enough," he said. "It needs to come back, be revised and we'll have another look at it and see if it's ready for acceptance." In an interview following the rally, he stated that the union would consider a work-to-rule, banning extra duties, including taking relief classes, attending staff meetings and writing individual student plans. Emphasizing the union's desperation to sign off on a deal and cease any further industrial action, he declared that the union that day had sent a "settlement proposal" to government negotiators, outlining "areas that must be addressed before an offer will be considered."

Teachers must take a sharp warning from this action. The AEU leaders function as industrial police for the government, seeking at every point to contain teachers' anger, minimise industrial action and impose an agreement that meets the government's budgetary requirements.

As a result of previous union sell-outs, wages and working conditions for pre-school and public-school teachers are some of the most appalling nationally. In 2016, the union signed off on an EBA that included a wage deal of 2.5 percent, described by Spreadbury, as a "win for both teachers and students."

This so called 'win' alongside other EBA betrayals, has led to a situation where South Australian teachers' wages are the second lowest of teachers nationally. The recent government offer of 2.35 percent, far from keeping up with inflation, will continue to see teachers near the bottom of the national salary scale. With housing and living expenses rising, many rural teachers financially disadvantaged due to geographic isolation, and some casual support staff not paid during the 7-week summer break, the union's wage demand of 3.5 percent annually for the next 3 years does virtually nothing to address decades of wage cutting.

Under the former Weatherill government, casualisation became the dominant feature of teacher employment. In 2011, 87 percent of the teaching workforce were permanent. This has declined to 67 percent this year, amounting to nearly a third of teachers on insecure contracts. For many teachers this has

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meant re-applying for a teaching position every year for more than 10 years.

The situation facing other education staff, including pre-school teachers, is even worse. For example, 56 percent of Student Support Staff (SSO) are on contracts, with 81 percent of SSOs working part-time. Eighty-one percent of Early Childhood Workers (ECW) are on contract, 90 percent part-time, and 51 percent of Aboriginal Education Workers are also on contract with 66 percent part-time.

Central to teachers' demands is the increasingly complex situation that staff confront in class rooms every day. An AEU survey last year revealed that the average class size is 28, with some primary classes beyond 30. In an average classroom of 28 students, teachers reported that five students often require individual education plans, another five will have learning difficulties that are not diagnosed and not funded, six students for whom English is not their first language, eight others requiring emotional or behavioural support and three others with disabilities.

All of this is leading to unmanageable workloads, burnout, stress, mental health problems, and growing teacher resignations, particularly graduates, with 50 percent leaving the profession in the first five years. Some pre-school teachers are working up to 30 hours, face-to-face teaching a week.

Heather McDonald, a teacher from Fulham North Primary School, who has worked in public education for more than thirty years, summed up the sentiment of thousands of teachers at the rally. She was interviewed by *InDaily*: "We want smaller class sizes and more respect for teachers. I am absolutely over children not having enough room to work and if we increase class sizes, particularly for the junior primaries, they're not going to have enough. Many teachers are underpaid and exhausted. I had two 14-hour days this week and I'm almost 60. I'm here because I love my job and I love my students but we can't keep doing it like this anymore."

These conditions are not confined to public schools in South Australia. They are common to teachers across Australia and internationally.

This was highlighted in a recent international report by the OECD, showing that Australian public-school teachers face higher workloads, fewer resources and more administration duties than global averages. Teachers in schools with high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage confront greater complexity in the classroom. Consequently, they have six minutes less, per hour of class time, available for actual teaching and learning, than their colleagues in more affluent schools. This is the highest gap of any OECD country.

Time spent on administration has increased, and is now 33 percent higher than the OECD average. Moreover, Australian teachers spend an average 45 hours per week engaged in work on school grounds—well above the OECD average. They have reported that "reducing class sizes" and "reducing teachers' administration load by recruiting more support staff" were by far their highest priorities.

Despite the common demands of teachers across state borders in Australia, the AEU has worked to divide them. At the same time as teachers in South Australia took action last November, Tasmanian teachers were striking over an EBA with similar demands. This week teachers in Tasmania rejected the union's recommendation of a 2.1 percent wage deal, threatening to put a motion of no confidence in the union executive if it did not reverse its position. This has coincided with the Queensland branch of the AEU arguing for the acceptance of a 2.5 percent wage claim, and cancelling proposed strike action set for later this month.

For the last 18 months, teachers in country after country—in the US, India, Africa, Europe, Latin America and New Zealand—have been driven into struggle against poverty wages and in defence of public education. While winning powerful support from parents, students and the working class, the unions have worked might and main to isolate each strike and force through a sell-out deal, in line with the financial demands and cuts being made by state and federal governments.

Unsurprisingly, the outcome of this week's historic and combined strike of New Zealand's primary and secondary teachers was a sell-out deal, orchestrated by the unions, which resulted in conditions not fundamentally different to the rotten ones that currently exist.

South Australian teachers determined to continue their fight must recognise that this will be impossible within the straitjacket of the trade unions. They, along with teachers across the country, in New Zealand and around the world, must break from the unions to form their own democratically-elected, rank-and-file committees. These committees need to turn to other sections of teachers, students and workers, who face a similar crisis.

They must develop a unified campaign, guided by a fundamentally different political perspective—the fight for a workers' government to implement socialist policies, against the capitalist profit system itself, including free high-quality education for all and decent pay and conditions for all teachers.

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