

Widespread opposition among South Australian teachers to union-government sell-out agreement

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Widespread opposition has emerged among teachers and support staff in the state of South Australia over a sell-out wages and conditions agreement, which was reached last month between the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the state Liberal government of Steven Marshall.

The AEU claims that the government's offer, put to a ballot of union members in the last days of the school year, from December 3–12, was passed by a narrow margin of 54–46 percent. The recording of such a large “no” vote in a state-wide education agreement in Australia is unprecedented.

The agreement does nothing to address the pressing issues confronting teachers of class sizes, resources in the classroom, casualisation of the workforce or intolerable teacher workload. Moreover, it will enforce a real wage cut that is below the rate of inflation.

The union had announced that it would put the government's proposed agreement to a vote on December 3. Aware of mass opposition to the deal among educators, however, it claimed it would not make a recommendation to either accept or reject the offer, fraudulently claiming that this was out of respect for the “democratic will of the members.”

The AEU allowed only seven school days for teachers to read the agreement, discuss and debate its contents, call a union meeting and vote, under conditions where educators are exhausted, stressed and overloaded, as they staggered through to the final days of the year.

Within minutes of the announcement of the ballot result, teachers took to social media to express their shock at the outcome and disgust at the role of the union leadership in pushing the agreement through.

One teacher, Bryce, commented, “Very, very disappointed and feeling hung out to dry. The executive needs to be removed immediately for sending the offer to members **WITHOUT RECOMMENDATIONS**. The timing is also highly suspicious as people are on leave, changing schools

and roles. Tired, stressed and unable to comprehend the complexities... Will seriously be considering cancelling my membership tomorrow. I hope the Executive read these comments. People feel betrayed and shattered..... This last 2 weeks an absolute joke...”

Marco posted, “I now wonder if there is any point of being a member. Saying we are happy being the second lowest paid teachers in the country, pathetic.”

Another teacher, Dave, said: “As this offer fails to address many issues, why has the union given tacit approval? Either say no or you are hedging your bets hoping money will sway members. At least that is what this looks like not the action of a union for its members.”

In an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*, Rosalind, an English as an Additional Language educator, who has been teaching for over two decades, said, “Why the rush to get a deal? The union executive made a statement along the lines that they thought it was important for members to make up their own minds. And that to me sounded very ‘counter-union.’ I thought that the idea of a union was that we formed a collective opinion. That we should have our discussions, and arguments and disputes together, and then present a united front once we had reached a decision.

“And, like all agreements, it is full of legal jargon and technical terms and we’re all exhausted and probably don’t have the know-how to work out what it means anyway, let alone the time or the energy to do that,” she added. “And my thought was, wait a minute, isn’t that why we elected you, because we’re looking for some guidance here. For the first time in my life, as a union member, I felt alone, and it was really disappointing.”

A number of teachers have questioned how it could have been possible to so quickly announce the results of the vote on the night that ballots closed. Within ten minutes of the closing of paper ballot votes across the state, the AEU sent an email, claiming the agreement had passed by a narrow

majority.

Rosalind said, “I think an extra blow to me was, I was heading home, the second last day of term from an all-day excursion of sports events, on the bus. Voting closed at 5.00pm, and it was ten past five, maybe not even that, when an email came through: “Congratulations” from the AEU. And my questions were, how did you count that many votes, when it was that close, in that sort of time, what was the mechanism, you know, many questions, how many of our members actually voted, how were they counted basically?”

Tina commented on the AEU Facebook page: “I too can’t believe this outcome. I look at our school ballot and how the hell this got voted yes. The government have won and are eroding more rights of teachers and students.”

Steve posted: “I cannot believe the ballot result. When I think back to the stop work actions and massive turn out to the rally on parliament steps, over half of those members voted yes???? All the energy to support our working conditions and the future of our children was somehow sapped away. What happened?”

Indeed, the AEU had worked for over 18 months to suppress and wear down the state’s educators’ widespread determination to fight for improved working conditions. It confined teachers to inane and demoralizing actions, including a half-day stoppage, and one-hour strikes: calling on teachers to take off the last hour of work in the week, after students had already been sent home early. It opposed any appeal to the working class for a united struggle in defence of the right to public education, instead proposing that teachers write letters to the education minister and send delegations to MPs.

This has followed a series of sell-out agreements under the former Labor government of Jay Weatherill, which have resulted in growing teacher casualisation. One third of teachers and nearly half of education support staff are now on insecure contracts. At the same time, they are the second lowest-paid teachers nationally. Average class sizes are 28 across the state, while many classes have more than 30 students.

Before it can be finalised, the agreement must now be ratified by a majority of education department employees across the state, including non-AEU members. Voting is set to take place next month, when schools reopen after the summer break.

If ratified, the agreement would exacerbate these already disastrous conditions. It includes a 2.35 percent wage increase each year for the next three years, and does nothing to reduce class sizes or teacher workloads. It also includes an insulting \$15 million per year to provide support for students with learning difficulties, behavioural and psychological problems and an array of other social issues, which averages

out to approximately \$29,000 per school. This amount is not even enough to employ one student support officer per school, let alone one support person for every class.

Lee, a secondary teacher of seven years, spoke to the WSWs about these conditions. “I was heartbroken,” she said. “The deal fails to recognise how complex our schools and classes are. We have issues around attendance, behaviour and learning ability. Twenty-four percent of our students are in “flexible learning” because they can’t meet the expectations of a mainstream class. Twenty percent are EAL [English as an Additional Language]. The average year 8 will arrive with year 3 literacy ability. Teachers at our site need smaller classes and more resources.

“Our school was a majority 90 percent no vote,” she said. “I don’t believe it went through because educators thought it was a good offer. I think, for the most part, people voted yes because they were so run down by their work commitments. I know I am so weighed down with all the responsibilities of the job that I barely have time for family, let alone be politically informed.”

The large no vote expresses a growing militancy and deep-seated opposition among educators across Australia and internationally. The past year has witnessed state-wide strikes by teachers across the United States and several other countries. In each case, they have developed in opposition to the trade unions, which consciously function on behalf of governments, as organisations for the suppression of teachers’ struggles.

The widespread opposition to the agreement must become part of a broader campaign among education employees, parents, and students, to reject the deal. This must become the starting point for a broader offensive of the working class in defence of the right to public education. Such a struggle can only proceed if it is taken out of the hands of the AEU’s strike-breaking apparatus and organised through the formation of independent rank-and-file committees, controlled by educators themselves.



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