

Australian Education Union's record of agreement sell-outs

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3 March 2022

Thousands of educators in Victoria are being urged by the Australian Education Union (AEU), to vote “Yes” to another sell-out agreement with the Andrews state Labor government.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) has called for a “No” vote, describing the agreement as a “monstrous betrayal,” following decades of sell-outs with both Labor and Liberal governments.

Contrary to the barrage of union spin, the agreement is a real wage cut for the majority of teachers, provides little to address appalling workloads and deepens the long and escalating assault on public schools and job permanency in the midst of a surge of COVID-19 infections.

The union hopes teachers have no memory or knowledge of previous agreements. AEU president Meredith Peace falsely claims the union has negotiated an “historic” achievement. Similar claims have been made with every other agreement.

Desperate to ram through the deal, the AEU has launched a misinformation campaign to bury the real details of its sell-out. This has been accompanied by the censorship and deletion of opposition posts on the union's Facebook page and the pushing through of “Yes” votes in undemocratic and bureaucratically-managed delegates meetings.

A brief history of the AEU's record demonstrates that the union will acquiesce to and collaborate with whichever government is in power, as long it remains a partner, policing government demands and defending its own privileges.

In 2003, the Victorian state Labor government employed the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) to devise a series of “Blueprints” for education. The big-business driven “Blueprints” were aimed at forcing up teacher productivity through performance benchmarks, targeting school and teacher “underperformance,” and a “regime of continuous improvements.” This corporatist “educational reform” model was embedded in the 2004, 2008, 2013 agreements and further deepened via the Bracks Review in the 2017 agreement.

The 2004 Victorian Government Schools Agreement (VGSA) committed to “performance and development arrangements,” surrendered definite ceilings on class sizes and sanctioned a blowout in the proportion of contract teaching positions. It stated: “The parties are committed to the standard mode of employment in the Teaching Service being on-going. However, the parties recognise that some fixed-term or casual employment will continue to be necessary.”

This was a green light to increase the number of teachers on insecure short-term contracts. The same clause exists in the 2022 agreement, providing loopholes for principals to not transfer teachers to permanency. Casualisation is now a perpetual feature, with some teachers on contracts for over 10 years. The 2004 clause on class sizes has not altered for nearly 20 years.

The 2008 agreement was signed after months of back-door negotiations. It saw AEU president Mary Bluett on the *Age* newspaper's front page kissing Premier John Brumby and hailing the deal as the “best achieved in 25 years.”

The union's original demands consisted of a 30 percent pay rise over three years, 20 students per class and permanent positions for contract teachers. Brumby offered a 3.25 percent wage deal with anything above that tied to productivity trade-offs. This was endorsed by Education Minister Bronwyn Pike who demanded teachers should pay for their salary rises by giving up a week of annual leave for school planning.

The deal delivered none of the teachers' key demands. Instead, first year and senior teachers received a nominal pay rise that barely matched the official inflation rate while everyone else took a significant real wage cut. It also introduced a new classification of principal “executive class.” It was the means of smuggling in a form of performance pay aligned to school goals and data, later described as the School's Strategic and Annual Implementation Plan.

The 2013 agreement was negotiated with the Baillieu Liberal government which demanded a 2.5 percent public

servant wage cap. Without any discussion with its members, the AEU dropped the wage claim from 30 to 12 percent over three years.

After 18 months of negotiations, three full-day state-wide strikes and mass meetings attended by thousands of teachers, Meredith Peace announced, via the media, an “historic achievement” of 16–20 percent wage rise. The contents of the agreement were not released until a week after her announcement.

In fact, the “historic” wage increase was based on including incremental pay rises that most teachers automatically receive as they gain seniority. Leaving aside the incremental increases, the real pay rises were between 2.75 and 3 percent, barely in line with inflation.

The agreement also included an “unsatisfactory performance” category, a new mechanism allowing the education department to fast-track the sacking of teachers within 13 weeks. Its inclusion was hailed as a “victory” by union officials.

“Priority status” for teachers named “in excess,” was removed, forcing them to compete against graduates for jobs. It was a means of eliminating older and more experienced staff, who were generally on higher wages. The 2013 agreement was the last time Victorian educators took strike action.

In 2017, the AEU signed a VGSA deal with the Andrews Labor government before teachers had seen or even read the 50-page document. The union held no mass meetings, work stoppages, strikes or work-to-rule bans. The deal was announced just days before teachers were set to vote for protected action and on eve of a term holiday break.

President Peace told the media that the deal would address “crushing workloads,” cynically describing it as “a great win for our members.” And like today, the AEU deleted oppositional comments from its Facebook page.

The deal provided no back pay, the equivalent of a wage freeze between October 2015 to April 2017, and ensured teachers remained at or near the bottom of the wage scale compared with other Australian states. Victoria, moreover, remained the lowest state for government funding per student, \$2,253 less than the national average.

Sixty-five percent of graduate teachers were on short-term contracts for their first five years of employment and there was no change to face-to-face teaching or class sizes. The agreement also included a grossly inadequate Professional Practice Day (PPD), one-day per term from scheduled duties. If the AEU succeeds in pushing through the 2022 agreement, PPDs will be systematically eliminated.

The AEU also agreed in 2017 to further tie “teacher performance” to department priorities, school improvement and student data, such as NAPLAN with online performance

reviews, including class observations, monitored by education department officials.

The union’s reward for these decades-long betrayals has been to further entrench themselves into school structures through the induction processes for new employees, time release for union representatives on consultative committees, paid leave for union state councillors and union training courses and fat salaries for full-time bureaucrats.

While educators struggle to make ends meet amid rising inflation, AEU president Meredith Peace and state secretary Erin Aulich each receive annual salaries of \$222,908, not including other non-cash benefits.

Educators need to carefully consider the AEU’s record of treachery. The union operates as direct participant in the government assault on the wages and working conditions of teachers and public education as whole.

Added to its record of betrayal, the AEU has unwaveringly collaborated with the government’s COVID-19 response, fully endorsing the dangerous reopening of schools and putting the lives and health of teachers and students at serious risk.

Teachers need to take matters into their own hands, vote “No” to the latest rotten deal and form independent rank-and-file committees in schools. This must become the starting point for a coordinated political campaign in defence of the public education system as a whole and for the rights and conditions of educators and school staff within the system.

Above all, what is necessary is a political fight based on a socialist perspective. The debt-laden Victorian Labor government, backed to the hilt by the union, is determined to defend the interests of big business at the expense of working people. Teachers have to reach out to their colleagues in other states and internationally, who confront very similar attacks, to fight for a society based on the social need not profits, in which a free, high-quality education is a basic right.

Join the Facebook group opposing the deal: “Oppose Australian Education Union 2022 VGSA draft agreement!”

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: @CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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