

South Australian education union pushes a sell-out agreement on wages and conditions in schools

Sue Phillips
12 December 2023

The Australian Education Union (AEU) executive in South Australia has agreed to a deal with the state Labor government on a new regressive enterprise agreement on wages and conditions. Unless voted down by teachers and school workers, the agreement will worsen already untenable working conditions in schools, and accelerate the public education staffing crisis that is being driven by teachers leaving the profession.

The union's agreement follows two full day state-wide strikes of teachers and education support staff, and three months of behind closed doors negotiations with the state government of Premier Peter Malinauskas.

The proposed agreement involves a 4 percent pay rise this year, back paid to May, and 3 percent increases over the next three years. The original claim was for a nearly 20 percent wage rise. In addition, the latest agreement goes nowhere near meeting spiralling cost of living prices on rent, groceries and fuel, with the official inflation rate over 5 percent.

Outgoing AEU branch president Andrew Gohl (annual salary of \$208,000) hailed the deal claiming that the government's offer made several improvements to key measures, representing "the largest ever investment in a South Australia education enterprise agreement."

He continued: "This offer, while imperfect, provides a strong foundation for our ongoing work to improve working conditions for public educators, as we continue to campaign for an education system that receives the respect and investment it deserves."

"Imperfect" is an understatement. Apart from miniscule adjustments, nothing has fundamentally changed since the government's last offer just a month ago.

Gohl claims that the wage increase is 13 percent over three years. Even this represents a real wage cut. But in fact, it is 13 percent running into 4 years, and amounts to just a 0.5 percent increase since the governments previous offer.

For more than a decade, wage cutting deals have been

imposed on teachers in South Australia, leaving them some of the lowest paid nationally. The AEU's last agreement, narrowly rammed through at the end of 2019 with 54 percent in favour and 46 against, involved nominal wage rises of 2.35 percent.

On teacher workload a pittance has been offered. The initial AEU log of claim was for a 20 percent reduction on workload and for a school support officer in every class. This has been rejected outright by the government due to "budgetary restraints." It has cut the public service as it commits to diverting more than \$2 billion into military-related enterprises and education facilities connected with defence projects such as nuclear-powered submarines being developed through the AUKUS alliance.

Bowing to the Labor government's austerity cuts, the union has accepted virtually no changes on workload, agreeing to just one hour extra of Non-Instructional Time (NIT) over the next 7 years for teachers based on the Index of Educational Disadvantage.

This is a complete insult. The index is used by the Department for Education to allocate resources to schools based on socio-economic status. The most disadvantaged schools have an index of 1, the least disadvantaged have an index of 7. Funding allocation is determined by economic disadvantage, migrant students, and neglected and homeless students. Under the government's proposed EBA, in 2024 index 1 schools will receive an hour of non-instructional time and then consecutively through to 6 and 7 indexes up until 2029. In other words, many teachers will not receive the additional non-teaching hour for more than 6 years.

Over a year ago the University of South Australia surveyed 1,600 teachers. More than 90 percent were considering leaving the profession and 50 percent planned to leave in the next 5 years. Most reported working more than 50 hours a week, which includes unpaid overtime, with 30 hours of this taken up with non-teaching administrative and assessment tasks.

Significantly, the one hour of extra NIT must be negotiated at the school level, about the scheduling and timeframe, adding another obstacle for teachers. In an email to members, the union claims that this will give teachers “greater autonomy of NIT” and “immediate relief to deal with urgent workload crisis.” And further, that teachers will now have “the right to disconnect” from digital communications and parent platforms after-hours. This is ludicrously presented as “a right” and an improvement!

Another claimed union gain is \$16 million to pre-school directors to address their workload, used in whatever manner the directors see fit. This amounts to approximately \$48,000 per year, not even enough to employ one pre-school worker. Other so-called union gains were the reintroduction of country incentives zone allowances for teachers working in remote and rural communities, something the government had already budgeted for and announced before teachers have seen and voted on the deal.

In a desperate effort to ram through the government’s latest offer, and block any further industrial action by teachers, an AEU email to members urging a “Yes” vote stated, “There is no silver bullet to fix a crisis brought by years of underinvestment, but we must work within the boundaries of what is possible.”

Speaking as loyal partners with the Labor government, the email declared that teachers have little choice because this is the government’s final offer, and if rejected it may call upon the South Australian Employment Tribunal to intervene and arbitrate.

Threatening educators with a worse outcome, it stated that “arbitration is a lengthy process that the AEU has very little control over, and members risk losing the hard-fought gains in this offer.”

This week a long-standing teacher spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*, declaring her contempt for the sellout and explaining why she was voting “No.”

“When I read the unions outline of the deal, I knew in 15 seconds that I would immediately vote ‘No,’” she explained. “There are absolutely no improvements, the wages deal is below inflation—in real terms a pay cut—and zero for workload. This is unfolding exactly like the last agreement, with a lot of foot stomping and postulating from the union exec about how terribly bad we are being treated, and then a sellout, running it down to the wire of the last week of term. They must think we are idiots.

“Nothing gets me angrier than this so called ‘right to switch off’ from emails and communications—it is an absolute joke. We are told we don’t have to answer calls unless they are urgent. Who decides whether it is urgent or not, what is the definition? Teachers are answering emails at 9 o’clock at night because they don’t have time during the

day and if you don’t answer then you are not magically given time to do it the next day. It is appalling!”

Referring to the union threats, the teacher said: “They are trying to scare us about having to go to arbitration. I think they don’t want to go to arbitration because they are losing money, we have ridiculously overpaid executives and a membership bleeding.”

Voting on the agreement concludes tomorrow, Wednesday at 5 p.m. Teachers and education support staff must vote “No,” rejecting the pro-business agenda of the Labor government and the threats of the AEU to impose another agreement sellout.

Educators have already shown their willingness and determination to take forward a struggle for better wages and working conditions with growing numbers taking strike action in the last three months.

The fight for better wages and conditions can only go forward through the formation of rank-and-file committees in schools and workplaces, independent of the union bureaucrats who are acting to straight-jacket members. These democratic organisations must turn out to other sections of workers that are facing similar attacks, including educators nationally who are confronting an ever-deepening crisis of the public education system.

The only organisation fighting for this perspective is the Committee for Public Education. We encourage public education workers to contact us and discuss the way forward.

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/678929646894212
www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: @CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact