

South Australia teacher opposition emerges against education union's wage and conditions sell-out agreement

Sue Phillips
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Widespread opposition has emerged among teachers and school support staff in the state of South Australia over a regressive wages and conditions agreement worked out last week between the Australian Education Union (AEU) executive and the state Labor government of Premier Peter Malinauskas.

The AEU announced last Wednesday that the deal was passed with 68 percent voting “yes” and 32 percent “no” in a ballot of union members held in the last days of the school year, December 6-13. The ballot turn-out was low, with only 68 percent of the eligible members voting. Significantly, the ballot officially closed at 5.00 pm and at 5.02 pm AEU members received an email announcing the result and providing details of the next stage in the ratification process.

Contrary to claims by outgoing branch president Andrew Gohl (annual salary of \$208,00) that the deal “provides a strong foundation for our ongoing work to improve working conditions,” the agreement does nothing to address pressing issues of intolerable workloads, lack of education support staff and resources in classrooms, casualisation of the workforce, and a deepening staffing crisis. According to Department of Education data, 35,000 students in the state are currently without a consistent teacher.

Moreover, the 13 percent wage deal over four years is below the rate of inflation, representing a real wage cut. This falls in line with the state government's pro-business austerity agenda of deepening budget cuts to the public service, targeting education and health, with millions of dollars continuing to pour into the elite private schools while public schools are starved of funds.

The AEU executive allowed just seven school days

for teachers to read the agreement, call schools meetings to discuss and debate its contents, and then vote. This is under conditions where educators are exhausted, stressed and overloaded, as they stagger through to the last two days of the year. The final tally was announced late on Wednesday last week, with schools closing for the year last Friday.

This process of ramming through regressive agreements in the last days of the year has now become the modus operandi of the AEU executive, which followed the exact same path in 2019.

Within minutes of the announcement of the ballot result on Wednesday, 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.

Many were angry and appalled about the claims of so-called union improvements on wages and workload. Against the original claim for a 20 percent reduction on workload and a support staff member in each class, the deal offered an additional hour of Non-Instructional Time (NIT) to be staggered to teachers across the state over the next 6 years, negotiated at the school level. In many cases teachers will not receive extra NIT until 2029. Nothing was offered regarding support staff in classrooms, class sizes or casualisation.

The AEU's Facebook page featured dozens of comments from teachers and school staff opposed to the union sell-out. Kimberley wrote, “Disgusted and appalled—at the Union for even putting this to a vote... Cannot believe it. I will be seriously considering whether I retain my Union membership if this is what it's worth.”

Sarah stated, “Union membership cancelled!!!”

Vanessa commented, “Unfortunately, the offer is a pay cut. And I won’t see support with workload until I’m 60 (55 now). I’m disappointed I lost 2 days’ pay for this offer. I still had fire in the belly to continue fighting for what we truly deserve. The offer continues to demonstrate how very little regard and respect we have from government (including absolutely no idea what we do on a daily basis).”

Keryl commented, “Beyond devastated! There is nothing in this agreement that improves any workplace conditions and 13% over 4 years is no win. All of this at a time when there is a significant teacher shortage. In my opinion now more than ever this put us in a position to stand our ground.”

These responses express the determination of many educators, who correctly feel betrayed and want to take a fight forward. This was clearly not the intention of the union bureaucrats—their aim was to ram through the sell-out as quickly as possible, threaten teachers that if they resisted the deal they would be worse off, and then head off to the summer holidays.

In an email reporting the ballot outcome, a prepared statement was sent outlining the next steps that include a vote of all school employees, AEU members and non-members, that is organised by the Department of Education and will likely occur at the end of January.

Arrogantly assuming that a majority of school employees would vote to accept the offer, the email spelled out details of the upcoming changes and how the union could “support members through the implementation of the agreement.”

Educators should reject the insulting sell-out of the union and organise the largest possible “no” vote on the state-wide final ballot of education department employees. The more than 32 percent of educators who voted “no” in the initial union vote express a growing and deep-seated opposition among educators across Australia and internationally. This opposition must be organised and developed as part of a campaign among school employees, as well as parents and students, to reject the deal as a starting point for a broader offensive in defence of the right to a free, high quality public education for all.

Such a struggle can only develop independently of the AEU apparatus, which consciously functions on behalf of governments to suppress teachers’ struggles. Independent rank and file committees, democratically

controlled by educators, need to be developed in every school and region, which will turn out to teachers and school workers throughout Australia in order to combat the ever-deepening crisis of the public education system.

The development of this movement requires a political struggle against the federal and state Labor governments that are responsible for imposing austerity measures against school staff and other public sector workers, as well as for maintaining the largely privatised, two-tier school system that is among the most unequal in the world.

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.

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