

Vote “no” to the sell-out agreement for education workers in South Australia! Build Rank-and-File Committees!

Committee for Public Education
24 January 2024

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) calls on teachers and school support staff in South Australia to vote “no” in the ballot for the regressive industrial agreement being pushed by the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the state Labor government.

The proposed agreement is a sellout, with the offered pay deal representing a substantial cut in real wages. Over the 12 months to September 2023 the Consumer Price Index rose by 5.4 percent (down from 7.8 percent in 2022). The main factors impacting the rise were the cost of housing, fuel, electricity and basic goods, all household essentials. The offered pay rise is a miserly 4 percent, back paid to May 2023, and then 3 percent over the next three years. This goes nowhere near covering the spiralling cost of living let alone making up for the pay deals that have been implemented by the AEU over the last decade.

In addition, the agreement does nothing to address untenable workloads, staff shortages, class sizes and deteriorating conditions in schools. The proposed agreement includes a phasing in of an extra hour of Non-Instructional time (NIT) over 6 years, depending on the government’s Index of Disadvantage. This means many teachers will not see the NIT hour until the end of the decade. In addition, the proposed agreement offers nothing on school support officers in classrooms, casualisation or class sizes.

The AEU balloted members on the agreement in the final week of the school year, giving them just seven days to read the proposal in the last week of the school year.

In an attempt to intimidate its members, the AEU threatened that rejecting the proposed agreement would result in the possibility of the government taking the agreement to the South Australian Employment Tribunal to arbitrate. This is a ploy regularly employed by unions

who are trying to push through regressive agreements, aimed at intimidating workers into accepting substandard deals. It was used in 2022 by the New South Wales (NSW) branch of the AEU, the NSW Teachers Federation as an excuse to call off all industrial action.

This is just one of the methods employed by union operatives and the government to intimidate teachers. Teachers have been threatened with disciplinary action if they make public comments about the deal. The rushed timing of the union ballot has been used by the AEU in South Australia as a means of defeating opposition as well. The last agreement was also rushed through in a vote at the end of the school year in 2019, under conditions when teachers are exhausted and stressed.

Such undemocratic processes are standard practice for unions, which regularly employ outright censorship, misinformation and undemocratic processes in order to intimidate and confuse workers. The claim by the AEU that the pay offer is 13 percent over three years is false. Education workers have not received a pay increase since May 2022. In reality the pay offer encompasses close to 4 years, and as such is significantly less than inflation which has been well over 5 percent since January 2022.

While the AEU has announced that members endorsed the agreement in the initial ballot, the reality is that only 68 percent of members voted and only 68 percent of those voted yes. In other words, just 46 percent of AEU members voted for the agreement, reflecting widespread opposition to the deal.

Nevertheless, the AEU bureaucracy is presenting the proposed agreement as a fait accompli. It is not a done deal, however—teachers need to make up their own minds, including both the union members who have already voted in the union ballot, as well as those who are not union members. South Australian educators have shown a

willingness to continue to fight for better pay and conditions and must reject this rotten deal.

Teachers and school workers need to take matters into their own hands. The fight for decent wages, workloads and properly funded public education means a determined political and industrial fight against both the state and federal Labor governments.

Governments both internationally and in Australia are claiming there is no money for health or education whilst they pour billions of dollars into preparations for war.

The South Australian government is no exception. South Australia has a huge debt of \$29 billion, with last June's budget forecasting this to rise to \$37.6 billion in the next four years. This debt will be clawed back through austerity measures directed against the working class, which are dictated by finance capital through the banks and international credit rating agencies.

The budget papers reflect the intent of the South Australian government with regard to education, estimating that in the four years until 2027, full time equivalent staffing numbers in education are expected to grow by less than 500. This is despite the fact that 35,000 students in the state are without a consistent teacher due to workforce shortages.

Furthermore, the budget papers state: "It is essential that wage increases in the public sector are sustainable. The government has budgeted for responsible wage outcomes reflecting the economic circumstances as there is no capacity to meet excessive wage and condition demands."

At the same time, the government of Premier Peter Malinauskas, in partnership with the federal government, has already committed an initial \$2 billion of public funds to the planned AUKUS nuclear submarines acquisition. Nationally, the Labor government has engaged in a massive militarisation of Australia, aimed at preparing for a frontline role in a US-led war drive against China.

In January 2022, two-thirds of South Australian teachers voted to strike against the dangerous reopening of schools, but the AEU, working hand in glove with the state government, then did everything it could to cancel the stoppage and ensure that its members were herded into COVID-infested classrooms as scheduled. As in other states, the result was repeated infections for many teachers and students, contributing to the growing number of deaths and Long COVID cases.

Governments that are prepared to support war and force the mass infection of children and workers with a deadly disease will not hesitate to impose harsh new burdens on teachers and other sections of the working class.

The CFPE rejects the claims that there is "no money." There are ample resources, but they are in the hands of the corporate and financial elite. Nothing less than a rebellion is required against the program of war and austerity being imposed on workers.

A "no" vote on the agreement is only the first step. The CFPE urges teachers to establish their own rank-and-file committees in schools and workplaces to take forward the fight for better wages and conditions. 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. This includes teachers and school workers in Western Australia, who are currently preparing for a new industrial agreement with the state Labor government there.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), which initiated the CFPE, fights for a socialist and internationalist perspective to unify the working class in political struggle for a workers' government to refashion society along socialist lines. The SEP and CFPE offer every assistance to teachers to establish rank-and-file committees and to take forward this political struggle. We encourage you to contact us and distribute our articles, statements, and posters in your school and other schools.

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout/

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: @CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact