

South Australian educators oppose union's sell-out school agreement

Our reporters

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South Australian teachers and public-school staff are in the midst of voting for on a three-year wage and working conditions agreement signed off between the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the state Labor government of Premier Peter Malinauskas. Balloting of all public-school workers, both AEU and non-union members, will conclude this Wednesday.

The proposed agreement amounts to a significant real wage cut. It will do nothing to address the appalling conditions in schools, including unsustainable workload, extensive casualisation, and the lack of resources and school support staff that has led to an ever-deepening staffing crisis in public schools.

Functioning as an enabler of the Labor government's pro-business austerity agenda, the AEU executive signed off on the deal after three months of closed-door negotiations and presented it to union members just days before the end of the school year. The union ballot of members resulted in 68 percent in favour and 32 percent against. Only 68 percent of union members voted—in other words, just 46 percent of AEU members voted for the agreement, reflecting widespread opposition.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) issued a statement, "Vote 'no' to the sell-out agreement for education workers in South Australia! Build Rank-and-File Committees!", which explained: "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.

"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."

Several educators spoke with the CFPE, explaining why they are voting "no." All requested to be anonymous, with some reporting threats of disciplinary action if they spoke to the media.

A primary teacher, with more than ten years' experience, said: "I'm voting 'no' for a number of reasons. Partly pay, partly workload and partly lack of union fight. I believe that the pay is inadequate compared to other professions. It doesn't match up with inflation and the rising cost of living. I am not happy to settle for 13 percent over four years.

"Workload is not sustainable, and never ending. Why are teachers completing so many admin tasks, often in their own time? Photocopying, laminating, classroom displays, data entry etc., should be completed by School Support Officers (SSO) or admin teams. Primary teachers are labelling stationery and books for students in their class. It seems ridiculous that a professional needs to spend time doing such basic tasks. You wouldn't expect a lawyer to do this, they'd have admin help or a PA."

Discussing the staffing crisis she explained, "Most of my teacher friends have stopped teaching. It all became too much. They loved their job with a passion, but could earn more doing something easier. Some took a pay cut because they just couldn't cope with the demands anymore. Others gave up their permanency, they fought so hard for, to do temporary relief teaching.

"The problems in classrooms are vast and complex, and are especially horrific in low socioeconomic areas. Very little teaching can happen there, as it's predominantly survival, behaviour management, and going back to basics with numeracy and literacy. I don't know how teachers manage in those sites long term. Schools urgently need more wellbeing staff, counsellors and ideally social workers. Psychologists would be amazing, but there's just not enough of them and they cost too much. More SSOs and admin staff are desperately needed. If government can find money to build nuclear submarines, they can find money for schools."

"I plan to keep my union membership for now, but I know

many are resigning. This is due to disappointment and not being able to afford it any more, or choosing not to prioritise it over other expenses.”

The teacher added: “The CFPE’s call for rank-and-file committees is an interesting concept. I like that teachers could fight for their rights and future for themselves. However, I wonder how many have the capacity to right now. They want to but are worn down by life and the workload. I think linking up with teachers in Western Australia who are presently fighting for a new agreement would be a worthwhile step.”

An Adelaide secondary teacher who began teaching in the early 1980s, criticised the role of the AEU and, like many others, questioned the outcome of the union ballot.

“I don’t believe the results of the AEU ballot,” they explained. “68 percent voted ‘yes’ and 68 percent of membership voted. This is amazingly coincidental? Even so, it is still less than 50 percent of union membership. What scrutiny was undertaken?”

“Facebook commentary shows many union members are resigning due to the poor and repeated enterprise agreements. The union is no longer fit for purpose. South Australian union fees are the highest in Australia, and I believe the board members are paid over \$200,000. I heard the elected union leadership positions were previously won on as little as 730 votes. This also signals a general apathy toward the union.”

On the issue of workload, with a phasing in of an extra hour of Non-Instructional Time (NIT) over six years, depending on the government’s Index of Disadvantage, the secondary teacher stated: “The offer on NIT is a joke! There aren’t enough teachers to staff schools now, and some teachers will need to wait six years for one hour, which means two changes of government, and changes to subsequent enterprise agreements.

“Pensions were, and rightly so, increased by 6 percent, more than our offer, while politicians got 10 percent. The other excuse for SA teachers being paid less is that cost of living is less than in eastern states. That’s no longer true—the cost-of-living excuse is a misnomer.”

Pointing to the growing divide in government funding, the teacher added: “State schools rely on school fees for basic services, whereas private schools have the equity to build Olympic sized swimming pools and have beautiful modern facilities. The federal government needs to adjust its funding to the same amount per student, public or private. Religious schools should be taxed as a business.”

A graduate teacher, who has had several contracts in both public schools and the Catholic system, explained the insecurity and economic pressures on contract teachers: “I was disappointed in the deal. We were asked to vote in the

last week, at the last minute when everyone was tired and frazzled. As a contract teacher I was thinking about pay over the holidays. The wages are half a percent increase, some teachers will even see a decrease.

“There is a sense of betrayal, considering teachers went on strike twice. The union was not in the slightest bit interested in what is best for the teachers. It is no coincidence that the president of the AEU is leaving. He will get his bonus. Even the wording of the union email encouraged teachers to accept the offer. It was very manipulative.”

The teacher continued: “I have a HECS [Higher Education Contribution] debt, and the indexation of this is 7.8 percent per year. So the wage increase needs to be at least this, at the minimum. We are seeing a yearly pay cut. And everything is increasing in cost.

“One Thursday last year I went to Coles, it was during Term 3, and I saw five or six other teachers from my school. I commented to one of them that it looks like the ‘sites’ shopping day today. One of the young teachers said, ‘it is pay day and this is the day where we can afford to do grocery shopping.’ We are university educated professionals, the future of the country is in our hands, and we are living from fortnight to fortnight.”

Discussing her experiences in both education systems, the teacher said, “There was more support for student behaviour in the Catholic system. They had more resources. If a student truants a lesson, someone is employed in the Catholic school to take care of this matter. In the public school, you had to take care of it yourself, and follow it up.

“Parents want what is best for their students and recognise the fact that private schools have more funding. For me, it is a question of job permanency, zero to do with private or public. Probably I would have preferred to have stayed in the public school, as I had developed a bond with students and staff and felt grief when leaving the public system.”



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