

Australia: The Age blames socialists for Victorian teachers' rejection of union-Labor sellout

Committee for Public Education
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In a comment last week, the *Age's* chief political correspondent Chip Le Grand bemoaned the rejection of a sellout enterprise agreement by Victorian teachers for the first time in over forty years.

Le Grand, drawing on the trope of the “outside agitator,” ascribed the defeat of the agreement to the influence of socialists. He particularly singled out the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), a rank-and-file teachers’ network initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, which had campaigned among educators for a “no” vote.

The column testified to nervousness within the corporate ruling elite over the teachers’ rebellion and the weakening grip of the trade union bureaucracy that it expresses. The *Age* is the most prominent “liberal” daily newspaper in Victoria. Le Grand is its most prominent commentator.

Le Grand defended the deal cooked up by the Victorian Labor government and the Australian Education Union (AEU) leadership, denounced the intervention of the CFPE and presented teachers as having been duped into voting “no.” In fact the *Age* played a not inconsequential role in trying, on behalf of the government and the union leadership, to bulldoze the agreement through by “leaking” it in their publication before it had even been released to teachers.

There was a glaring contradiction at the heart of Le Grand’s column. Aside from blaming the campaign of the CFPE, he was unable to explain why almost 58 percent of teachers had voted “no” to the AEU-Labor deal.

“Victorian teachers are Australia’s worst paid. This is a serious problem,” Le Grand acknowledged. “The obvious solution, one the AEU leadership and government thought they had settled on, was to give them substantially more pay.”

The image of a beneficent government and AEU bureaucracy offering a major pay rise on a platter, only to be rebuked by befuddled educators, is not only an insult to teachers’ intelligence. It is a complete falsification.

In reality, the deal provided for real compound wage increases of only 6.7 to 7 percent per year, under conditions of resurging inflation, which could rapidly exceed that level. The agreement contained no measures to address unbearable

working conditions, including immense workloads, ballooning class sizes and understaffing. Lowly-paid Education Support staff were offered a one-off “allowance” rather than any permanent increase to their base wage.

Le Grand was compelled to note the impact of the last 2022 sellout, when the AEU and the Victorian Labor government locked teachers to pay rises of less than 2 percent per annum amid the cost-of-living crisis, which amounted to a real pay cut of more than 10 percent. He presented that as an unfortunate aberration, with no connection to the current dispute, as though the past four years of real wage cuts that teachers have endured were of no material significance.

A right-wing figure, who previously worked for Murdoch’s *Australian* newspaper for 25 years, Le Grand was unstinting in his praise of the AEU leadership. He did not mention the anti-democratic methods through which the 2022 sellout was imposed, including widespread censorship, which the AEU had replicated in the lead-up to the recent ballot. Those methods not only expose the AEU as an industrial and political police force. They underscore the determined and deliberate stand by teachers expressed in the mass “no” vote.

Le Grand’s greatest concern was that the vote expressed a weakening of the grip of the union bureaucracy.

Referring to a CFPE statement, he wrote: “Not content with voting down the pay deal, they want to tear down the AEU and the entire enterprise bargaining system.” Later, he stated: “It is hardly breaking news for a union to have hard-core socialists in its ranks. It becomes a problem when people more interested in the fight than a fix hold sway over a union membership.”

The enterprise bargaining system that Le Grand defends has been a central mechanism for a decades-long assault on the jobs, wages and conditions, not only of educators, but of the entire working class. Introduced by the Keating Labor government in the early 1990s, with the full support of the union bureaucracies, enterprise bargaining divides workers up, locks them into extended agreements negotiated behind closed doors and prohibits any industrial action outside a narrow bargaining period.

For teachers, that has meant an AEU sellout every four years,

either reducing real wages or keeping them stagnant, and providing for the ongoing gutting of public education by governments, the majority of them in recent years led by Labor. Every other section of workers has gone through the same experience over decades, from public health staff to private sector employees.

For socialists and for workers to challenge that corporate-government-union set-up is illegitimate, according to Le Grand. He wrote: “The desire to blow up the system rather than reach agreement through constructive bargaining is an expression of industrial Hansonism, which, in the case of teachers struggling to meet rent and mortgage payments on moderate incomes, serves only to aggravate grievance.”

Again, if the enterprise bargaining system had been so beneficial to teachers, why is it that they are “struggling to meet rent and mortgage payments on moderate incomes”? The idea that teachers would receive anything more than “moderate incomes” or live lives that did not involve a daily struggle to make ends meet is dismissed out of hand by the professional journalist, who is presumably well remunerated for his services to the corporate elite.

The reference was to Pauline Hanson, the leader of the far-right One Nation, which has come to prominence amid the crisis of the two-party system of Labor and the Liberal-Nationals. The comparison of socialists, who oppose all forms of racism and fight for the unity of the working class, to Hanson’s frothingly anti-immigrant outfit, is a slander.

Hanson, moreover, is a creature of the corporate elite, who has opposed pay rises and bemoaned that it is too difficult for businesses to sack workers. She would no doubt heartily agree with Le Grand’s attack on socialists and teachers.

Much of Le Grand’s column is snide ridicule including its headline, “Victorian teachers are caught in a turf war. It’s Pythonesque but no laughing matter.” That is the tired trope from Monty Python, of socialists as inveterate “splitters.” Le Grand states that the CFPE has sought to “out-Bolshie” two other organisations that have been active among teachers, “Socialists in schools” and “Fight the Crisis.”

In reality, the CFPE’s opposition to those organisations has nothing to do with a “turf war” as Le Grand suggests. Those organisations have functioned as a “loyal” opposition to the AEU leadership. They have called on teachers to pressure the AEU to hold more strikes, but have insisted on the unchallengeable authority of the AEU leadership and its anti-democratic framework, even as the sellout operation has been underway.

That is in line with the positions of the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative and Solidarity groups, which defend the union bureaucracy across the board and promote Labor as a “lesser-evil.”

The CFPE, by contrast, has called for teachers to take matters into their own hands, including through the establishment of rank-and-file committees at every school.

Such committees, independent of the AEU framework, would enable the widest democratic discussion among educators, free from the censorship of the bureaucrats; they would unite teachers, across Victoria and nationally, in opposition to the division enforced by the unions, and they would formulate demands based on what teachers and schools require, not what pro-business governments and their allies in the union bureaucracy declare to be “affordable.”

Le Grand draws attention to the CFPE’s socialist perspective, citing one of its statements, which declared: “The fight for decent wages and conditions in public schools is inseparable from the broader political struggle against the dictates of the capitalist profit system.” He presents opposition to capitalism as an “outside” agenda with no connection to the teachers dispute.

But in reality, the teachers struggle poses the need for precisely the political fight advanced by the CFPE and for a socialist perspective. The state Labor government, like its federal Labor counterpart, is overseeing an agenda of cuts to wages and conditions, and sweeping austerity, to make workers’ pay for a deepening crisis of capitalism and for unprecedented military expenditure. The pro-capitalist union bureaucracies, in Australia and internationally, are the enforcers of this program, aimed at returning social conditions to those that existed in the 1930s.

A socialist perspective means placing society’s resources under the control of the working class. The CFPE unapologetically advances a socialist program, which would entail putting the banks and the corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control, so that the vast resources hoarded by the ultra-wealthy and squandered on war could be diverted into public education, healthcare and other vital necessities.

Le Grand’s suggestion that the “no” vote was primarily the result of the CFPE’s campaigning is absurd. But what is true is that the experiences through which workers are passing are objectively posing the need for a rebellion against the union bureaucracy, a political fight against the Labor governments and a new perspective.

Le Grand’s comment had the character of a warning to the ruling elite itself, amid growing opposition in the working class, that the CFPE and the Socialist Equality Party are advancing such an alternative perspective.



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