

Australia:

Bracks government keeps thousands of teachers on short-term contracts

By Margaret Rees
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Early in March, Victoria's Education Minister Mary Delahunty announced that the Bracks Labor government, elected late last year, would virtually eliminate contract teaching in the state's government schools. Permanent employment would become the standard, she declared. But in a revealing speech in parliament on April 5, Delahunty disclosed what the government means by permanent employment.

"For the first time performance-based employment and a 12-month probation period have been enshrined," she said. Under the guise of removing contract teaching, she is advancing a serious erosion of all teachers' conditions.

Since the former Kennett Liberal government introduced contract teaching in 1993, and began the destruction of 9,000 permanent jobs, most new teachers have been placed on fixed-term contracts. Kennett's aim was to have 30 percent of teachers on contracts, matching the growing casualisation in private industry. Over 6,000 teachers—18 percent of the total—were employed, at their principal's discretion, for periods ranging from one month to five years.

Within schools, especially those with even higher proportions of contract teachers, a regime of tension and insecurity has prevailed, reaching a fever pitch when contracts came up for renewal. Classes have been constantly shuffled from one teacher to another, with little concern for the students.

Delahunty's plan, a slightly modified and disguised version of Kennett's, is driven by the fact that the contract system has begun to collapse under its own weight. Teacher shortages have become severe, particularly in certain secondary subjects and in difficult-to-staff rural schools. Young teachers cannot

afford to move to remote country areas on the prospect of only a short-term contract. A shortfall of 900 teachers has been predicted next year and 1,900 in three years.

Delahunty's changes are notable for how much contract teaching they leave intact. They serve to split away one-third of existing contract teachers—those on contracts longer than 12 months—from the others. Those on longer terms are eligible to apply for ongoing employment, subject to an additional 12-month probation period on top of what they have already served. The remaining teachers—at least 4,000—will remain on contract, even though they are filling jobs that once were held by permanent teachers.

A Department of Education document, *Circular 36/2000*, spells out six categories of “genuine” contract positions. These include replacements for teachers on various types of leave. Before the introduction of contract teaching, these absences were filled by permanent relieving teachers who were appointed centrally and paid an extra salary.

Other categories include specific projects, the employment of under-qualified teachers and where a principal believes that a permanent appointment will create an “excess situation”. The sixth category—“for any other approved reason”—provides a blank cheque for principals to hire casuals.

The reference to under-qualified teachers displays the government's real orientation. While many schools are understaffed, teachers are forced to teach subjects for which they have no qualifications. This situation is now being legitimised.

Moreover, principals have been given new powers to sack permanent teachers. For the first time, principals

can designate ongoing teachers in excess and recommend their sacking. The Education Department's internal journal states: "In a first for Victoria, retrenchment could now be enacted in schools." (*Victorian School News*, March 16)

In her April 5 speech, Delahunty stated that teachers will in fact be sacked for failing to pass performance tests. "Either you agree with performance-based assessment or not," she told MPs. "If teachers fail the performance test there should be and will be retrenchment processes."

From 1980 to 1993, teachers in Victoria resisted the attempt to introduce contract teaching under various guises, knowing that it would be used as a battering ram against all conditions in schools. It took two Liberal state governments and the Labor governments of Cain and Kirner to wear down this resistance with the assistance of the teacher unions.

Under the banner of local decision making, the Kennett government gradually shifted staffing powers to school principals and forced them to implement budget cuts at the school level. The Liberals' *Schools of the Future* program transformed the principal's role from educationalist to financial manager.

The principals, themselves on contracts, selected contract teachers for their productivity, cheapness and subservience. Contract teachers provided a benchmark, enabling principals to force the rest of the staff into constant increases in productivity. In order to drive a wedge further into ongoing employment, all promotion positions were placed on contract.

Under the same banner of devolution, the Labor government's initiatives continue this process. Teachers can still be promoted or transferred to other schools on contracts, while retaining their old permanent positions in their original schools, where contract teachers replace them. This not only sets one school against another, but also means that contract teachers cannot discover exactly which positions they are filling.

Moreover, even if all eligible contract teachers were granted ongoing employment, there would still be a shortage of properly qualified teachers in schools.

Having accepted contract teaching as a *fait accompli* under Kennett, the Australian Education Union (AEU) has depicted Delahunty's measures as a great victory. The *AEU News* (March 2) stated: "Over the next 12 months, this Agreement should see most contract

teachers access ongoing positions." The truth is that contract teachers can merely *apply* for permanent positions, but only a minority will be successful.

The union's description of its agreement with the government emphasised its role as the broker of the new arrangements. Under the heading *Union monitoring* it stated: "Any position which a school seeks to advertise as fixed term must be provided to the AEU to enable scrutiny and the opportunity to raise any concerns and, if necessary, to have the decision reviewed."

Similarly, the AEU's version of the sixth category—"any other approved reason"—is "any other reason agreed between the Department and the union".

Finally, there is a section on *Compassionate Transfers*, which have not existed for seven years. In fact, with the erosion of centralised staffing it became almost impossible for ordinary teachers to transfer at all, effectively locking them into particular schools. Delahunty has offered a cosmetic improvement, which the union dutifully presents as a great gain.

The union's only concern with transfer rights is that "the union can directly apply and advocate such cases and has access to appeal against unfavorable decisions". Such advocacy is a critically important function for the union as it seeks to integrate itself into the government's arrangements. That is why not one objection has been forthcoming from the AEU about the introduction of "performance based employment".

The AEU have heralded Delahunty's announcement as the first of many educational "reforms". In fact, what the Bracks government has done is to legitimise the system of contract teaching and further undermine the rights and conditions of teachers. Far from being a great gain, it is a warning of what is being prepared for public education under the new Labor government.

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