

The AEU and the Victorian teachers' wage rise campaign

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Thousands of teachers in the Australian state of Victoria will strike for 24 hours on November 21 to attend a mass meeting in Melbourne and launch their campaign for a 30 percent wage rise over the next three years.

The claim for a new Enterprise Bargaining Agreement, which includes demands for a reduction in class sizes and the number of teachers on short-term contracts, was overwhelmingly endorsed in a state-wide postal ballot earlier this month. The next 24-hour strike is planned for February 14, during First Term, with four-hour walkouts to follow.

More than 90 percent of the over 15,000 teachers who participated in the ballot backed proposal for unlimited 24- and 4-hour walkouts. While the overwhelming vote for strike action is another indication of the growing mood of resistance amongst teachers to the ongoing assault on their living standards and working conditions, the Australian Education Union (AEU) has no intention of conducting a serious struggle against the state Labor government of Premier John Brumby.

Victorian teachers are amongst the lowest paid of Australian state school teachers—those on the top rate receive \$7,000 or 11 percent less than their counterparts in New South Wales—and more than 19 percent or almost one in five are on short-term employment contracts.

Moreover, according to a recent survey, 26 percent of primary teachers and 46 percent of secondary teachers in Victoria are teaching outside their areas of qualification, creating mounting pressure and stress levels. At the same time, deteriorating conditions have seen increasing numbers of new teachers quit the profession after five years. One survey found that 52 percent leave public education within 10 years, with 80 percent planning to leave the profession entirely.

AEU Victorian Branch President Mary Bluett has denounced the state Labor government's offer of a 3.25 percent rise per year for the next three years and called on teachers to "take a stand against the insulting position of the government".

These comments, however, are little more than hot air. The poor wages, working conditions and run-down state of government-funded schools are a direct result of the ongoing collaboration between the teacher union leadership and state governments—Liberal and Labor alike—over the past three decades.

Bluett and the rest of the AEU leadership are desperate to maintain their role in imposing the policies of the government.

This is clearly demonstrated by the record. Particularly since the early 80s, the union has overseen the closure of hundreds of schools, the destruction of thousands of teachers' jobs and the systematic undermining of conditions.

While the AEU leadership will no doubt mouth phrases about defending teachers at the November 21 mass meeting, it will bend over backwards to accommodate to the state government's demands.

This is exactly what occurred in 2004. The AEU leadership called for a 30 percent pay rise, cuts in class sizes and improvements in conditions. But after two 24-hour strikes it settled for a 12 percent rise over three and a half years, with further attacks on working conditions.

As well, the 2004 settlement maintained contract teaching, abolished automatic salary progression and promotion, and introduced new disciplining and performance methods with retrogressive pay demotion and the fast tracking of younger teachers who allegedly showed "leadership".

The Socialist Equality Party fully endorses teachers' claims and calls on all sections of the working class to give them their widest support. But in order to defend their wages, jobs and conditions teachers have to carefully review their experiences under the AEU leadership and make a decisive political break from its collaborationist policies. The union functions not to defend its membership but as joint partners in the ongoing government assault on state education.

In line with the Accord and other corporatist agreements between the Hawke-Keating federal Labor government and the trade union bureaucracy between 1983 and 1996, the teacher unions worked hand in glove with the state Labor government of Joan Kirner to introduce District Provision, which was used to "rationalise" state education.

With ever-diminishing funds, school communities were forced to accept government proposals as the only way of retaining resources. Under the banner of providing "greater curriculum choice", dozens of schools were amalgamated and closed, with the teacher union representatives participating as District Provision committee members.

This framework was enthusiastically embraced in 1992 by the incoming right-wing state Liberal government. Premier Jeff Kennett utilised it to close more than 300 schools and slash 9,000 teachers' jobs, or more than 20 percent of the state's teaching workforce in just seven years—from 1992 to 1999. The AEU

refused to mobilise its members to fight these measures and when teachers took industrial action to defend their schools, the union isolated them.

Contract teaching was introduced in 1993, creating a two-tier system within the schools. Contract teachers have no permanency—they are forced to repeatedly apply for their jobs. Many contracts last a year but some can be as short as one term. The union allowed this to be introduced without so much as a protest.

While the AEU hailed the defeat of the Kennett government in 1999 as a great victory, claiming it would lead to improvements in public education, the assault has continued unabated under Labor.

In 2001, the AEU welcomed the Bracks Labor government's formation of the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT), a body that claims to maintain professional standards. The VIT forces new teachers to undergo a strict registration procedure, even though they already have university qualifications. This has nothing to do with improving the quality of education, but is another disciplinary mechanism—and one that can be used to force teachers out of the education system.

Labor also retained, and expanded, the contract teaching system. Currently, almost one in five teachers is on a short-term contract, the highest level ever and exceeding the numbers during the Kennett years.

According to a recent AEU survey, 75 percent of first-year teachers and 60 percent of those who have been working for three years are employed on short-term contracts. In fact, the AEU codified its acceptance of this retrogressive system in its 2004 agreement, which stated “that some fixed term or casual employment will continue to be necessary.”

Another measure—Labor's so-called “Blueprint for Education”—was introduced in 2003.

The “Blueprint” created “schools of excellence” and a so-called “culture of continuous improvement”, which has intensified competition between schools. Local school administrators are pressured to meet arbitrary testing standards or face replacement and demotion. The AEU welcomed the “Blueprint”, claiming it would raise standards.

At the same time, the state Labor government has resumed school amalgamations or closures in working class areas, such as Bendigo, Broadmeadows, Altona, Dandenong and Echuca. In Broadmeadows, for example, 17 state schools will be amalgamated into seven primary schools and one secondary college, while in Dandenong three high schools are being integrated into a single entity known as an “education precinct”. Labor has again justified these measures with bogus claims of improving educational standards. AEU president Mary Bluett told the media that the proposals would lead to “increased opportunity for students in that local area.”

In 2005, Labor also introduced its “Capital Investment and Access Planning Policy”, which requires schools applying for capital works to submit their plans for lifting student results. Poor conditions in the schools ensure that many local communities opt for amalgamations, with the promise of more resources and funding.

Likewise, the AEU has already lent its support to Labor's

private-public partnerships (PPPs) in building and repairing schools, another means for private infrastructure companies to plunder public funds.

The AEU's record demonstrates that teachers fighting to defend their wages, conditions and public education itself have to undertake a political struggle against the teacher union bureaucracy. The union's claim that Labor represents a “lesser evil” than the Liberals is aimed at pulling the wool over teachers' eyes.

In the recent Victorian nurses' dispute, the state Labor government used the Howard government's repressive WorkChoices industrial relations legislation, and it will do the same against teachers or any other section of the working class. Rudd Labor has already committed to retaining the essential features of WorkChoices. Teachers should be under no illusions: a federal Labor government will be no less ruthless than Howard in implementing the corporate agenda of privatisation, and tearing up working conditions.

While the AEU leadership claims the nurses' settlement was a victory, the nurses were forced to accept increased productivity with the union agreeing to “work with the government to improve performance”.

Likewise, the Brumby Labor government has made clear that any increase in its offer of a 3.25 percent wage increase to teachers, which barely keeps up with inflation, must be met with savings in other areas. Given that salaries comprise 90 percent of school funding, any savings will entail outright job cuts.

In order to prevent yet another defeat, and the further destruction of public education, teachers must prepare to expand their action and appeal for industrial support and solidarity from other sections of the working class. Above all, teachers need to recognise that they are involved, above all, in a political struggle, requiring a decisive political break from Labor, and its apologists in the trade unions, and the adoption of an alternative socialist perspective—one that challenges the very basis of the capitalist profit system itself.

The SEP insists that billions of dollars be allocated to ensuring that free, high quality public education, including child care and kindergartens be available to all; that teachers be fully compensated for all rises in the cost of living, including petrol, mortgages and rents, and that all teachers be offered full-time, permanent jobs.

That is the program being advanced by the Socialist Equality Party in the 2007 federal elections I urge all teachers who agree with it, to support our election campaign and apply to join the SEP.

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