

Australian teachers' union backs new "performance pay" regime

By Frank Gaglioti
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The Australian Education Union (AEU) in Victoria has signed a secret deal with the state Liberal government, effectively backing its new draconian "pay for performance" regime for public school teachers.

Last October, Premier Denis Napthine's government announced that teachers' annual reviews would introduce a mandatory failure rate, with between 20 and 40 percent arbitrarily declared "underperforming." This would deny those targeted their usual incremental salary increases. It would also threaten them with dismissal under "fast track" provisions imposed by the AEU as part of an enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) it negotiated with the government earlier in the year.

These moves marked a new stage in the bipartisan drive to undermine the public education system and tie teachers' salaries and job security to NAPLAN standardised test results. (See: "Australian state government announces 'performance pay' school regime")

The AEU postured as an opponent of these measures. It initiated a case in the Federal Court, claiming that the government violated an EBA stipulation that it be consulted over changes to annual performance appraisals. After the court organised behind closed-door mediation between union and government officials on November 7 and 8, the AEU announced it was withdrawing its legal challenge in return for the government postponing the new "performance" regime. The 2013–2014 review cycle would proceed as usual, with the new measures taking effect later this year. The government also indicated that the mandatory 20–40 percent failure target "would not apply."

AEU state president Meredith Peace described this as "a significant win."

Underscoring its contempt toward ordinary teachers, the AEU refused to release the text of the settlement. Union official Marlene McLean told this writer that the terms of the agreement were "not for general distribution."

On November 14, however, state education minister Peter Hall gave a statement to parliament in which he made clear that the union signed on to the government's regressive agenda. "The important thing about these agreements is that the AEU, the government and the department now agree that performance assessments should have regard to overall school outcomes and should be conducted in a 'serious and diligent manner,'" he declared.

Hall continued: "This agreement now signals an agreement by all sides to apply a rigorous process of performance assessment. [W]e will work with interested parties to develop a revamped performance and development assessment process from 2014–15 onwards. We look forward to working with teachers unions and principals associations in that regard. That is why I welcome the agreement. It certainly clarifies for everybody exactly what is expected of them."

In other words, in return for the government working more closely with the AEU, the trade union agreed to help implement its new regime.

This follows the union ramming through an EBA last April that featured clauses eroding teachers' conditions and job security, including mechanisms allowing teachers deemed "underperforming" to be sacked in a new 13-week fast tracked process and the removal of protections for teachers deemed "excess" to schools' staffing requirements. The EBA paved the way for the government's current "pay for performance" offensive, with Hall declaring at the time that the system of near-automatic annual incremental salary

gains would be replaced by “rigorous assessment of performance.”

The union claimed as a victory the absence of specific clauses in the EBA about performance benchmarks, and denied there would be any changes to the existing system. On its Facebook site, the AEU declared: “There is NO CHANGE to the way staff will increment under this agreement ... If the government does want to change the system in future it will have to consult us first.”

Now the AEU is again lying about its role. In the latest issue of its monthly magazine, it published a letter from a teacher who noted: “We’ve just had a long EBA dispute after which the union said the government backed down on performance pay. Clearly they didn’t ... The union allowed this to happen. The 20–40 percent underperformance quota is all about pay rates, not performance.”

Meredith Peace replied: “The AEU Leadership was very clear in explaining the terms of our new agreement in detail prior to members voting. This included addressing the possibility of changes to the performance and development process in the future.”

This is false. The union did everything it could to obscure the real content of the EBA, including withholding the details of the agreement from its members for nine days after publicly announcing the deal with the government. As well as seeking to cover up the clauses affecting teachers’ conditions, the AEU hoped to prevent scrutiny of its bogus claim that teachers had won a 16–20 percent wage rise. The union pressured teachers to nominate delegates to approve the deal, before they even had an opportunity to read what it contained. The delegates’ meetings were designed to limit discussion and quickly ram through a “yes” vote for the agreement.

Throughout its collaboration with the state Liberal government, the AEU bureaucracy has been actively assisted by the Teachers and Education Support Staff Alliance (TESA), a faction within the union led by the pseudo-left organisations, Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance. Socialist Alternative’s initial article on last year’s EBA began by declaring that the “good news” was that teachers “beat back performance pay!”

TESA organised a protest outside the state parliament on November 7, to coincide with the AEU’s Federal Court case. The demonstration was aimed at providing

the union bureaucracy with some political cover while it stitched up a deal with the state government. Neither TESA, Socialist Alternative, nor Socialist Alliance has written a single word about the AEU-government settlement since it was announced, underscoring their complicity in the assault on public education and teachers’ rights.

During the EBA negotiations, only Socialist Equality Party members and supporters warned that the union was preparing a far reaching sell-out that would pave the way for new regressive “performance” benchmarks that seek to cut teachers’ real wages, sack hundreds of teachers, and close down or amalgamate public schools in working class areas.

The SEP has insisted that a struggle to defend public education requires the formation of rank and file committees in every school, independent of and opposed to the AEU, uniting teachers, education staff, students and parents in a political struggle against the state and federal governments. This requires a turn out to other sections of the working class confronting attacks on their jobs, wages and conditions, and the adoption a new political perspective based on the struggle for a workers’ government committed to socialist policies, including the provision of a free, high quality education for every young person, with properly resourced and well paid teaching staff.

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