

Australian Education Union campaigns for Labor government in state election, following imposition of sellout industrial agreement

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In the weeks prior to today's state election in Victoria, the teacher union covering public school and TAFE workers has promoted illusions in the Labor Party and Greens, suggesting that voting for these parties is a means of opposing the attack on public education and teachers' conditions that has been imposed over decades.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) is attempting to help the incumbent Labor government be re-elected by mobilising members to attend polling booths in marginal electorates, distributing how to vote cards favouring Labor and the Greens, and placing Liberal Party candidates last.

AEU Victorian president Meredith Peace wrote a statement on the election, headlined "Do the Liberals deserve your vote?" It insisted, in bold text, "Putting public education first means putting the Liberals last" on ballot papers.

In her statement, Peace condemned the records of previous state Liberal governments, in office between 1992–1999 and 2010–2013, and promoted Premier Daniel Andrews' Labor government. She hailed the government's meagre spending initiatives in the last four years and declared: "Labor has a demonstrated track record of investing in schools, TAFE, and early childhood ... the Andrews government has announced funded strategies that respond to many of the critical needs of public education."

Who does Peace think she is kidding? The Labor Party has been in power in Victoria for 19 of the past 23 years, and its "demonstrated track record" is one of systematic underfunding of public schools, imposing real wage cuts and higher workloads on teaching staff, and promoting the publicly-subsidised private school system.

The government is also criminally responsible for the mass COVID-19 infections that have ripped through

schools since the systematic dismantling of all public health protection measures. Andrews and the AEU collaborated to ensure the schools remained open regardless of infection levels, as a critical measure to satisfy corporate demands for adequate workforce participation levels. The outcome is a system in which there is a chronic shortage of teaching staff, with the situation poised to worsen even further as the majority of teachers are planning to quit the profession.

The AEU's pro-Labor election campaigning comes just five months after the union worked hand in glove with the government to ram through a sell-out industrial agreement. This featured nominal wage rises of less than 2 percent a year, far below increases in the cost of living. The union bureaucracy imposed the agreement in the face of unprecedented opposition with 40 percent of members voting "no" and rejecting the betrayal.

Then in the most contemptuous manner, ignoring the concerns and sentiment of school workers, the AEU invited Andrews to be the keynote speaker to its annual conference last July. This made clear their collusion and de facto alliance. State education minister Natalie Hutchins and the Greens education spokesperson Sam Hibbins attended the conference. While the highly paid and privileged AEU bureaucrats were very happy to rub shoulders with Andrews, members of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), who politically led the opposition to the wage-cutting agreement, were denied admission as observers.

A vote for Labor or the Greens in the state election represents no way forward, doing nothing to overcome the dire situation ripping apart the crisis-ridden public education system.

The Andrews government has maintained Victoria's longstanding status as the Australian state with the lowest

funding per student in the public school system.

A recent analysis by the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority analysing the financial and socio-economic rankings of schools nationally with funding from both state and federal governments shows that Victoria's poorest schools have become more financially disadvantaged than they were five years ago, while half of the state's elite schools are now better off. Sixteen of the 20 poorest schools were more financially disadvantaged in 2021 compared with 2016. This represents an indictment of the policies of both state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal alike.

In the election campaign, Labor has promised an additional \$2.7 billion to education over the next four years. The opposition proposes similar funding to schools as Labor. The likelihood of any of this being delivered is highly dubious as Victoria has the worst debt and deficit across Australia. Debt stands at \$101 billion and is projected to increase to \$259 billion in just over a decade.

Even if the \$2.7 billion was spent, the sum is utterly inadequate to overcome the situation in public education. Labor's election promises are to build 25 new schools, on-site kindergartens at some schools and 90 upgrades of infrastructure. This represents a pittance compared with what is actually required. Since 2015, Labor has built just 48 schools under conditions of a massive growth in the population.

Schools in outer working class suburbs are bursting at the seams. In Point Cook, 22 kilometres west of central Melbourne, Alamanda public school has 3,300 students, up from less than 400 when it was opened in 2013. The school has installed multiple double-story portable classrooms, leaving only very limited playing areas for children. Different grades have staggered start and end times to cope with the traffic congestion each morning and afternoon.

Many older public schools are falling apart due to inadequate funding. A recent video issued by secondary students at Sunshine College North Campus, in a working class suburb in western Melbourne, provides a glimpse of the disastrous state of public-school infrastructure.

Meanwhile the private school sector receives ever-growing windfalls. Since 2015, enrolments in non-government schools have increased by 9.5 percent. The Andrews government recently committed another \$717 million to Catholic and independent schools, including for four new Catholic primary schools with 13 upgrades.

The Labor government also provided a \$5 million grant to the All Saints Anglican School in Shepparton, a

regional centre. The grant will go toward a \$30 million construction that will open in 2024 as a prep to year 7 school, expanding to year 12 in 2029.

This is after the Andrews government, with the support of the AEU, carried out the closure of four public schools in Shepparton, amalgamating them into one super-school of more than 2,000 students, against strong community opposition. The controversial super-school has been a complete disaster, with dozens of experienced teachers leaving, much-needed student welfare programs eliminated, and hundreds of students desperately seeking education at other schools in the district.

This crisis is creating opposition among educators and throughout working-class communities, as governments Labor and Liberal alike, create a two-class, segregated education system where the majority of students attend disadvantaged schools and the most advantaged students attend the fully resourced elite private schools.

The union stranglehold, on behalf of government and business, is a common experience of educators, and workers nationally and internationally. This underscores the need for educators to contact the Committee for Public Education, establish rank-and-file committees, putting power and decision-making back in the hands of educators, to organise democratic discussions and to prepare a genuine industrial and political struggle against all of the governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike.

Everyone must have, as a basic social right, access to freely provided, high quality education. This, however, is only possible through the socialist reorganisation of society, with social need rather than corporate profit made the basis of economic life.



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