

Western Australian teachers—vote “no” to proposed Labor government-union sellout agreement! Build rank-and-file committees!

Committee For Public Education

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A draft three-year enterprise agreement negotiated between the State Schools Teachers Union of Western Australia (SSTUWA) and the state Labor government represents an enormous sell-out.

The proposed deal includes an effective real wage cut and does nothing to address massive class sizes, untenable workloads, and staff shortages. Voting on the agreement takes place between June 17 and July 4. The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) urges teachers and school workers to vote “no,” as an initial step in developing a political counter-offensive for a properly resourced public education system.

The agreement involves a nominal wage increase of 12 percent over three years. This goes nowhere to overcoming spiralling cost-of-living, housing, fuel, rent and food, let alone making up for the pay deals that have been implemented by the teachers’ union over the last decade.

The present offer of 5 percent in the first year, 4 percent in the second and 3 percent in the third, follows the union bureaucracy’s jettisoning of the initial log of claim for a two-year agreement, with a 7 percent wage rise in the first year, and 5 percent in the second.

SSTUWA officials claim that the proposed agreement represents a real wage gain because projected three-year inflation is 9.5 percent, less than the 12 percent wage deal. This does not hold water. Government projections for inflation have for years underestimated the actual rate of price rises. Moreover, the official inflation rate significantly understates the real impact on working people of escalating housing, electricity and grocery costs.

There is no cost-of-living adjustment clause in the draft agreement, meaning that school workers will receive no compensation through higher wages in the event that inflation again surges over the next three years.

The SSTUWA bureaucracy also sold-out teachers on the critical issue of class sizes. Its proposed deal with the Labor government leaves unchanged the status quo, with Western Australia having the largest class sizes in the country. This sees class sizes remaining at 25–27 for pre-primary, 32 in Years 4–10, and 25 in Years 11–12. On this basis alone, the union’s agreement should be thrown in the rubbish bin.

Every teacher knows that class size is one of the critical determinants of school workloads and is also fundamental to creating a positive and safe learning environment. Each additional student means more assessment and reporting, more individual plans, more time with parent meetings, more time dealing with behavioural and well-being issues. Teachers in Western Australia, like their

counterparts throughout the country, are at breaking point.

In the union’s 2023 State of School survey, 90 percent of teachers reported their workload was high or very high, with 89 percent reporting very high stress levels and 86 percent having considered quitting in the last four years. Nearly everyone, 93 percent, believed that smaller class sizes would benefit them and their students through better learning outcomes, improved classroom behaviour and more one on one time with students.

SSTUWA President Matt Jarman has told teachers that “workload reduction measures have been addressed in this third offer [from the government]” and that “The importance of these workload related conditions cannot be overstated.”

These are flat out lies. Immediately after the quote above, Jarman referred to a new “positive effort to manage class size issues.” In other words, rather than investing the necessary resources to reduce class sizes, the Labor government has agreed to a handful of minor measures aimed at having schools better “manage” the situation.

These measures include “clear instructions” to school leaders that they “will provide additional support to teachers asked to manage oversize classes.” This is a meaningless clause that leaves the door wide open for regular cramming of more than 32 students within a single classroom.

Another ludicrous clause claimed as a win by the union is the formation of a “Workload Ministerial Taskforce,” including SSTUWA officials, which will report to the education minister.

A so-called Targeted Initiative (TI) in the agreement involves providing small group tuition to 13,000 students in 350 schools. This affects fewer than half of all public schools in the state. Teachers will supposedly be employed for tutoring groups of 2–5 students, some teachers employed for as little as half a day and others full-time. This new program will do nothing to reduce workload for classroom teachers, and in some cases may in fact add to it, if time is required to coordinate instruction and assessment work with the assigned tutors.

It is unclear whether the tutor positions will be filled as scheduled next year, amid a deepening staffing crisis. In the last four years in WA more than 6,000 teachers have left the profession and hundreds of classrooms lack a regular properly qualified teacher. A similar tutoring scheme was adopted in Victoria in 2021, but many employed tutors rarely work with small groups of students as intended because they are used to cover for staff absences when appointments cannot be made and relief teachers are not available.

The final measure claimed as a workload win by the SSTUWA involves hiring the equivalent of 64 full time positions across 192

schools as complex behaviour support coordinators. This equates to appointing a staff member in these schools (fewer than a quarter of all public schools) to work for an average of five days for every three weeks on behaviour support.

This is clearly inadequate in dealing with the complex and escalating behavioural problems that teachers confront in classrooms every day. Recent studies have found that WA teachers face violence in their professional lives up to 11 times more frequently than the general population, with the state's public schools experiencing a violent incident every 45 minutes. In addition, in a recent survey 55 percent of principals reported experiencing physical violence from both students and parents.

The union's proposed deal has met with significant opposition within the schools. Social media comments from teachers include one writing, "A hard no from me. 1% above PREDICTED inflation, and no acknowledgement of the previous years' freeze. Predicted inflation? Seriously? How good were predictions over the last three years? Vote no."

Another stated: "This is an outrageous offer. 'Expected inflation' well they've been well off on that the last few years. '12% over 3 years' is just barely better than original offer. AND Most importantly—nothing on class sizes explicitly. Classes at our school are mostly full to 32 and teaching those it's near impossible to cater to all students - they wonder why results across the board are dropping... this is why I don't like this, especially not being able to renegotiate for 3 years as this profession continues to lose experience left and right. Vote NO."

In a desperate effort to counter such sentiment, the union bureaucracy has threatened that rejecting the agreement could result in the government making an administrative decision, involving a 5 percent salary increase with no changes in conditions, a lengthy arbitration process, or the opening up of new negotiations that may take months. Such warnings are regularly employed by unions to intimidate their members and push through regressive deals.

In the last two years, sell-out agreements have been enforced in nearly every Labor state. In 2022, the Australian Education Union (AEU) in Victoria rammed through a wage-cutting deal with the Labor government which imposed below inflation annual pay rises of less than 2 percent and did nothing to address intolerable working conditions.

In November 2022, New South Wales Teachers Federation leaders, after three state-wide stoppages, shut down all action, urging teachers to back the election of a state Labor government in May 2023, claiming it would improve pay and conditions. Last month the Minns government announced budget cuts of \$148 million to public schools this year and \$1.4 billion over four years.

In January this year, the AEU in South Australia followed the same course, imposing a sell-out deal complying with the austerity agenda of the Malinauskas Labor government dictated by the banks and international credit agencies.

Teachers need to draw the lessons from the experiences of educators in other states and with the SSTUWA over decades—reject the sellout and take matters into your own hands. Form rank-and-file committees that are independent of the union apparatus to take forward the fight!

For years, the highly paid union bureaucrats have worked to isolate teachers from each other, as well as from broader sections of workers, who are increasingly calling for action to fight the assault on pay and conditions. In order to fight for sustainable workloads, decent wages and high-quality public education, teachers need to build their own

organisations of struggle, democratic committees that link up with teachers in other states, and broader sections of the working class, including other public sector workers who are coming into struggle for proper wages and conditions.

Both state and federal Labor governments have cut education spending in recent years. The state Labor government of Premier Roger Cook in Western Australia enjoys both a massive parliamentary majority, and a \$3.7 billion budget surplus based on rising iron ore royalties. Like its counterparts nationally, it works to advance the interests of the major corporations and finance capital.

During the April 23 half day state-wide teacher strike—the first for over a decade—state treasurer Rita Saffioti made clear the government's agenda. She declared that the government had presented a "very generous package [that] balanced the union's needs with the need to balance the state budget," adding that "we don't want to be in a situation of other states where they basically bankrupted their state, losing AAA credit ratings."

In other words, the finance credit rating agencies, on behalf of the capitalist class as a whole, determines what resources are available for public schools.

This underscores the reality that teachers and school workers securing a "no" vote on the proposed agreement is only the necessary initial step. The fight for a properly resourced public education system, within which teachers and school workers enjoy decent salaries and manageable workloads, is above all a political fight. The social right of all to a free and high-quality public education requires the united mobilisation of the working class against the Cook and Albanese Labor governments.

We urge teachers to contact the Committee for Public Education today to discuss this perspective.

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