

Western Australian teachers' union pushes through sell-out wages and conditions deal

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12 July 2024

An enterprise agreement deal between the State Schools Teachers Union of Western Australia (SSTUWA) and the state Labor government of Premier Roger Cook was recently approved, with ballot results showing 70.5 percent in favour and 29.13 against. The online vote of union members concluded on 4 July, and involved 7,797 participants.

Opposition to the three-year agreement on wages and conditions was more widespread than the near-30 percent “no” vote suggested. The union apparatus worked to intimidate teachers and school workers who were outraged by the deal, threatening an even worse outcome through government-mandated arbitration if it was voted down.

The enterprise agreement represents a significant sell-out that will further worsen appalling conditions in public schools. It includes a real wage cut and fails to address large class sizes, heavy workloads, teacher stress and staff shortages.

The deal involves a nominal wage increase of 12 percent over three years, which is insufficient to combat rising costs of living. It also does not make up for the inadequate pay agreements implemented by the teachers' union over the past decade. The current deal includes a 5 percent increase in the first year, 4 percent in the second, and 3 percent in the third, which deviates from the initial two-year proposal that included a 7 percent increase in the first year and 5 percent in the second.

SSTUWA officials claimed the agreement represents a real wage gain, citing projected three-year inflation at 9.5 percent, which is less than the 12 percent wage increase. However, this argument is flawed as government inflation projections have historically underestimated the actual rate of price increases. Moreover, the official inflation rate does not accurately

reflect the real impact on working people due to rising housing, electricity, and grocery costs.

On workload and staffing very little or nothing has been addressed with class sizes of 32 still embedded in the agreement.

In the lead up to the ballot, the Committee for Public Education called for teachers to reject the deal and the fight for independent organisations of teachers through the formation of rank-and-file committees. (See: ‘Western Australian teachers—vote “no” to proposed Labor government-union sellout agreement! Build rank-and-file committees!’)

The outcome of the dispute underscores that teachers are in a political fight against the state and federal Labor governments, all of which are committed to imposing austerity on behalf of big business. The fight to build such committees is all the more urgent following the latest union sell-out deal, and we encourage teachers and school workers to contact us and develop a discussion on the necessary next steps.

The CFPE recently spoke with a primary school teacher in Western Australia with more than a decade and a half of teaching experience working in schools in both regional and remote communities. In the weeks leading up to the ballot, he actively fought for his colleagues and other teachers to vote ‘no.’ The teacher, who requested that he remain anonymous, made the following points:

This agreement doesn't cover the things that we were most concerned about. And on top of that, the pay deal is not good enough with cost of living and who knows what inflation is going up to. The wages deal comes off the back of us previously showing good faith accepting a public sector wage cap for years, and we didn't get any real compensation for that. The union gave some

figure on inflation and the Department [of Education] says inflation is going to be something, but we all know how those predictions, even six months out, can be often wrong.

The union says they have a big master plan to campaign on class sizes for the next agreement. I have very little faith in that too. Judging by the vast majority of this campaign, it has basically amounted to coercing and threatening teachers into accepting a deal that's substandard. They said if we voted no we could be in a worse position.

In addition, oppositional voices have been suppressed. For example, I didn't like the way the union regularly dropped its information on its social media page right before five o'clock, and then immediately after they posted, declared that comments must be turned off due to moderation requirements. So basically, the union Facebook page instead of being a vehicle for discussion or questions pretty much acted like an advertising branch of the Department.

Teachers are all contemplating their future. I know of principals on stress leave at the moment, thinking whether they will continue—even younger principals trying to work out if they can afford to just drop down to doing relief teaching.

How I see it is, there really isn't a teacher shortage as such, but more likely a shortage of teachers that are willing to work for such appalling pay and working conditions. There are now so many unfilled teaching positions. When I started teaching, schools had plenty of options and plenty of people to choose from. Now it is so different.

The shortages mean we really struggle to get released for planning. Very often, we have classes split up or programmes like sport, will have to just be cancelled, and those teachers have to go into the classroom. Often principals have to go into classes and teach.

I hate to see what difficulties teachers are having at the more challenging schools where there are severe student behavioural issues, including daily incidences of student violence. Any supposed support in the agreement on some of these issues is largely window dressing and completely minimal. We seem to be getting more and more challenging student behaviours and support seems to be harder and harder to access. I have no education support staff in my classroom and support is harder than ever, near impossible to get. I

have kids that can't read and write even within three or four years of their age level.

Just as we are returning to work on Monday with worsening conditions with the union patting itself on the back, I received the union magazine with a front cover promoting a community campaign for lower class size. This is after they have signed off on a three-year deal not to lower class size. I was so angry I didn't open the magazine and threw it in the bin. As a result of all of this, I have heard of lots of teachers resigning from the union.

We have a state Labor government with a huge surplus, and federal Labor, but yet nothing positive is happening in public education. When do we say, that's enough, we're not accepting this? When do we stand up and say, we need to invest more money in public education?



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