

Support won for victimised teacher

Margaret Rees
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Geraldine Rawson

Despite intensive blocking efforts by the union leadership, Committee to Defend Public Education (CDPE) members opened up an important discussion at last weekend's Australian Education Union (AEU) Victorian state conference on the victimisation and sacking of Geraldine Rawson and other teachers.

Before the conference opened, CDPE supporters circulated leaflets explaining that Rawson had been dismissed because she had taken a stand against the Kennett state government's Teaching Service Order 140. This regulation enables teachers to be removed on the basis of unproven allegations and outlaws public comment by any teacher on government policy, including their own dismissal.

Given the significance of Rawson's sacking, a delegate to the conference, City of Footscray Secondary College teacher and CDPE member Will Marshall, moved for suspension of standing orders to discuss the issue, only to be immediately opposed by AEU president Mary Bluett.

Marshall sought to move a resolution calling for Rawson's immediate and unconditional reinstatement, and the repeal of TSO140. It also demanded that the union end its five-year complicity with TSO140 and make known the number of teachers victimised, charged and dismissed under its provisions.

Over 30 of the 150 delegates supported Marshall's call, indicating growing concern over TSO140, the broader issue of the gagging of public sector workers

and the refusal of the unions to oppose this.

Only that morning, the Melbourne *Age* newspaper revealed a drive to silence government workers: a witch-hunt in Victorian hospitals against health workers over the leaking of documents showing seriously-ill patients being removed from waiting lists for financial reasons, and threats of disciplinary action against public servants to stifle dissent. A further article added that an unnamed rural school principal has been threatened with action under TSO140 for sending a letter home to parents supporting an AEU stoppage. The report also cited the AEU claiming it had no record of any of its members being dismissed for making public comment on education policy.

In fact, Geraldine Rawson was dismissed on charges under TSO140 that included distributing leaflets and speaking at a union meeting about her case. Another teacher, John Glazebrook, was sacked in 1994 on charges that included speaking on a community radio station and writing a letter to a local paper in opposition to education policy.

After the union leadership opposed Marshall's motion, the issue of TSO140 could only be raised near the end of the conference through the framework of a branch resolution submitted by Sunbury Downs Secondary College. It made no mention of Rawson's case at all, even though she had addressed the branch prior to her sacking. The motion also suggested that the union negotiate a new disciplinary process with the government.

In debate, Marshall opposed the resolution because it would not halt victimisations but establish a procedure in which the union would participate. He warned that in the context of budget cuts, school closures and the privatisation of education, any disciplinary process would be used to target teachers for removal for financial and political reasons.

He also condemned the resolution's failure to defend

Rawson. 'The stand taken by Rawson is so important because for the first time an essential government mechanism to silence and scapegoat teachers is being exposed for what it is, and in that way the whole agenda of the Kennett government is being directly challenged.'

Marshall detailed the record of the AEU in enforcing TSO140 on its members. He read from the union's information document for teachers victimised under TSO140, which advises them to abide by its procedures, including the confidentiality clause. Marshall noted: 'The union insists that the charged teacher accept the principal's complaint. There is no avenue at all to say that you have been victimised.'

He demanded to know why the AEU had told the *Age* it knew of no members dismissed for making public comment. Bluett tried to avoid answering by ending the debate. When the vote was taken, the motion was substantially lost and she tried to move on to the concluding business.

Marshall insisted on an answer from Bluett. The delegates listened, hushed, as she proceeded to deny the fact that both Rawson and Glazebrook were dismissed for political reasons.

The AEU's position underscores the need for an independent campaign. Letters demanding Rawson's reinstatement and the repeal of TSO140 should be sent to:

Letters of protest can be sent to:

Peter Allen
Deputy Secretary (Director of Schools)
Department of Education
GPO Box 4367
Melbourne 3000 Australia

Fax:

03 9637 2120

E-mail his secretary:

di.burns@dse.vic.gov.au

Copies of letters and messages of support should be emailed to editor@wsws.org

Geraldine Rawson and CDPE members are also available to speak at schools or workplaces.

See Also:

Victimised Australian school teacher dismissed

[15 July 1998]

Further moves to privatise education in Australia

[17 June 1998]



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