

Socialist candidate warns Victorian teachers of union betrayal

Frank Gaglioti, Socialist Equality Party candidate for Calwell
22 November 2007

Will Marshall, a teacher at Footscray City College and the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for the federal seat of Melbourne, addressed a mass meeting of 10,000 striking teachers in Melbourne yesterday, advancing a socialist alternative to the ongoing betrayals of the Labor and union leaderships.

The meeting overwhelmingly endorsed the union resolution of a 24-hour walkout for February 14 and a series of regional four hours stoppages in pursuit of a 30 percent wage increase over three years. It also demanded a reduction in the number of short-term contract teachers.

While teachers voiced their anger over the Victorian state Labor government's paltry offer of a 3.25 percent wage increase, Australian Education Union (AEU) officials demonstrated that they had no intention of defending wages and conditions. The official resolution allows them to maintain their ongoing collaboration with the Victorian state Labor government, which will continue implementing its agenda of school closures, short-term contract employment, sub-standard pay rates and poor working conditions.

Union officials will negotiate with the state Labor government over the next two months. Throughout the meeting, they were intent on promoting the illusion that the election of a federal Labor government would defend their members' rights and conditions.

The AEU leadership's real purpose was exposed most clearly in its desperation to prevent any genuine discussion and debate at the meeting. A timid amendment calling for another mass meeting to ratify any final settlement was even denounced by AEU state secretary Brian Henderson, who claimed it would "disenfranchise" regional members.

Marshall was the only speaker to oppose the official resolution. He indicted the AEU leadership's political record and foreshadowed a counter-resolution. AEU Victorian branch president, Mary Bluett—the main speaker and meeting chair—read only part of it, bureaucratically ruling that it was "out of order" and outside the union's log of claims.

Marshall's resolution warned that in order for teachers to avert another defeat and the ongoing destruction of public education, they needed to expand their action and appeal for industrial and political support from other sections of the working class.

The resolution called for the payment of the full wage claim with no tradeoffs; the elimination of the contract employment system; a reduction in class sizes to 20 and the hiring of extra teachers throughout the state; no school closures and amalgamations; and for billions of dollars to be allocated to radically improve state education.

The resolution explained: "Such a program can only be achieved through teachers making a decisive political break from the Labor Party and its apologists in the AEU and the adoption of an alternative socialist perspective—that is, one that challenges the very basis of the capitalist system itself.

Marshall told the meeting that the AEU leadership's resolution was "farcical" and "a replica of what was presented to us in 2004".

During the last wage contract negotiation in 2004, the union called for a

30 percent wage rise, held two 24-hour strikes, and then signed an agreement with the Labor government that not only accepted a 12 percent wage rise over 3.5 years, but maintained its backing for contract teaching.

Marshall asked the meeting, "How did this come about? It didn't just fall from the sky. It is a direct result of the union leadership's collaboration with state Liberal and Labor governments.

"Teachers on short-term contracts now stand at over 19 percent of the teaching workforce. This is the highest level ever. Eighty percent of young teachers are on contracts. This is at a time when there are increasing social problems in the schools. In 1993, when contract teaching was introduced, there was not even a whimper from the teacher unions.

"But the AEU signed on the dotted line. As the 2004 agreement says, 'some fixed term casual employment will continue to be necessary'. In other words, they signed a blank cheque to allow the government to do what it wanted. But guess what? In the current log of claims this year you find exactly the same thing".

AEU president Bluett tried to silence Marshall, interrupting him on two occasions with the claim that he was not speaking to the resolution.

But Marshall was given important backing from sections of the mass meeting when he directly challenged Bluett, declaring: "I am speaking to the resolution. I'm raising the union's record because if you know someone's record, you know what they'll do in the future." A number of teachers scattered throughout the 10,000-strong meeting demanded Marshall's right to be heard, and Bluett backed off.

Marshall pointed to the AEU's efforts to support the election of a Rudd Labor government and warned that this would be a political trap for teachers.

"The AEU on its web site," he said, "asks teachers to help elect the ALP this weekend by handing out an ACTU-backed *Your rights at work* pamphlet. And we all know what that means. Vote Labor.

"The union's claim that Labor represents a 'lesser evil' than the Liberals is an attempt to pull the wool over teachers' eyes. Already the state Labor government has utilised Howard's *WorkChoices* against the nurses, and Rudd's IR has all the same essential features of Howard's—it illegalises striking."

Marshall warned: "Above all, our struggle requires a break from Labor, and their junior partners in the AEU. Education has to be based on need, not on the budget constraints of Liberal and Labor governments."

The AEU leadership immediately responded to Marshall's intervention by shutting down any further discussion and putting the official resolution.

While the AEU's resolution was overwhelmingly passed, teachers are becoming increasingly hostile to contract employment and concerned that any future wage settlement will be tied to further productivity demands from the state government.

These concerns were reflected in the support for Marshall's intervention and the loud applause in response to Audrey Gunn, a 23-year-old contract teacher, who spoke prior to the discussion on the official resolution.

Gunn detailed the horrendous conditions facing those on short-term

agreements. She was cheered when she declared that contract employment was like “being on trial” and called for teacher graduates to be given stable, ongoing jobs as soon as they left university and for the abolition of such retrogressive agreements.

As teachers marched through Melbourne yesterday afternoon, Labor premier Brumby contemptuously declared that any wage rise above the government’s 3.25 percent level would require a range of productivity tradeoffs, ensuring that schools became “more efficient”.

Contrary to the AEU’s claims, a Rudd Labor government will not protect teachers’ wages and conditions. It will intensify the Howard government’s attacks on state-funded education. Labor leader Rudd has embraced Howard’s reactionary school funding formula—Socio Economic Status funding—in toto until 2012. This blatantly favours elite private schools over the public system and will result in a major expansion of the private system at the direct expense of the public.

Rudd is also a proponent of school league tables, in which schools’ results are used to pit one against the other. With funding tied to enrolments, the lower ranked schools face a rapidly declining funding base, and then closure or amalgamation. In other words, a Rudd Labor government will deepen the market-based policies that the Victorian state Labor government has already imposed on the state education system.

The way forward for teachers lies not in a Labor victory in the federal elections or in the union’s meaningless protests against the Brumby state government. It lies in teachers beginning to conduct a conscious political struggle against the entire Labor and union bureaucracy on the basis of a socialist perspective, aimed at ending the profit system and providing a modern, high quality and free public education system for all.

* * *

A number of teachers spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the ongoing erosion of conditions.

Michael Meeking, a music teacher of 12 years, said: “It’s impossible for us to give any more time than we already do. I’m part-time and although I only teach for three days a week I have to spend the rest of the week preparing, report writing and countless other things. In other words, I work a five-day week on three days’ pay.

“Contract teaching is really bad and has to change. It’s not fair for teachers who are just starting out to be subjected to this. At the school where one of my friends teaches there were five or six teachers whose contracts were not renewed. This means they’re out of work. What are they supposed to do with their careers and all the training they put into it?”

Andy, from Mill Park Secondary College, said: “It’s the second largest school in the state—across two campuses, there are 1,700 students. I’m a ‘traveller’—I work 48 periods a fortnight, and I have so-called ‘two spares’ to travel between the two.

“I’ve lost faith in the union. I feel the AEU has been putting off its real active fighting responsibilities—it should be trying to fight for our working and pay conditions. It is atrocious—over the last 10 years our wages have declined against CPI—we get these three percent palm-offs—it doesn’t address our needs at all.

“Brumby in the *Age* today says we’ve got the best teaching conditions in Australia. Are you joking? He claims no other state or territory pays so much! He’d supposedly be happy to work back in teaching! What a joke!

“I’ve heard horror stories regarding cases filed against teachers whereby the union was very reluctant to become involved. It may be only hearsay, but it has made me very sceptical, I’m afraid.

“I have struck with the union every time in the last 21 years. I’m wondering whether the AEU is prepared at all to take up a fight against the government. It doesn’t matter which government gets in—we’re heading to a really destructive future—where it is just the pursuit of the dollar against human needs and rights”.

Pavlos Andronikos, a former lecturer in Greek is now teaching English

at a high school. He said that teachers should not allow the union leadership to make any tradeoffs for the 10 percent wage claim. “The public education system today is not run by those interested in genuinely teaching people but ideologues and bean counters.”

“Our workloads are already too demanding,” he said. “There are not enough hours in the week to do what we have to do as teachers today. Much of our time is spent in preparation, extra curriculum work—we have too many additional duties to do our jobs as teachers properly.”

“I’ve always supported Labor but honestly I don’t think any really difference whether it’s Liberal or Labor is in power. The state Labor government has never been friends of teachers and yet the teachers’ union has always supported Labor. I can’t see how this has been of any help.

Anne Gillard and Lyndell Shepherd from Kew High School said that they backed Will Marshall’s comments to the meeting.

“I think the union executive should spend a year in the schools, preferably with some Year 9 classes. Their memory of teaching is from the 1970s and it’s incredibly harder now. We can be asked to do any extra job for no extra money because of the pay system. We have such a small time allowance that has no relation to the length of the job”.

Commenting on the AEU’s refusal to even allow a final mass meeting to ratify an agreement with the Labor government, Shepherd said, “And we’re not allowed to come back and vote on any decision—it’s got to be left up to someone else.”

“I feel sorry for contract teachers. They just have to jump higher and higher. When you think back to when you were a first year teacher—what a mess you made. But you still had a job, and you could learn and you did learn. Now you’re not allowed to do that, you have to be perfect from day one. And you have stuff that you have to fill in from the VIT [Victorian Institute of Teaching], and for all that effort you still don’t necessarily get your job back.

“But we’re also getting discriminated against because we’re older. I have had a school principal say to me, for two old teachers like you; I can get three young teachers who will do whatever I say. And they have to jump through any hoops that they’re asked to. That’s why Labor wants them in because they’re malleable.

“We want to work a 37-hour week instead of getting to school at 8am and getting home at 5.30 and then having to do marking for an hour. We’ve been teaching for 33 years. We have to teach our classes, do our reports and on top of that learn something new in our own time.

“Both of us have taught in the private system for a short time. But we left that because we didn’t like the top down management. But what we’re finding in the state system is that it’s reverting to that”.

Authorised by N. Beams, 100B Sydenham Rd, Marrickville, NSW
Visit the Socialist Equality Party Election Web Site



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact