

Australia: Victorian teachers' union blocks discussion on strategy to oppose government attacks

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Public school teachers in the Australian state of Victoria struck for one day on February 14 for a long-outstanding log of claims that includes a 30 percent wage rise over three years, a maximum of 20 students per class, a reduction in face-to-face teaching and an increase in full-time positions to reduce the number of contract teachers.

The log was overwhelmingly endorsed at a mass meeting of Australian Education Union (AEU) members in Melbourne on November 21 last year, along with a campaign of limited industrial action that included the February 14 mass meeting and a 24-hour stoppage. Premier John Brumby's state Labor government has bluntly refused to increase its wage offer of just 3.25 percent annually for three years and wants "productivity trade-offs" for anything above that amount.

More than 10,000 teachers attended the February 14 mass meeting with several hundred more outside the main arena. The large turnout clearly demonstrates teachers' determination to redress falling wages and restore working conditions bargained away by the AEU leadership in previous union-negotiated enterprise work agreements.

However, teachers who came expecting to participate in a wide-ranging discussion on how to take forward the campaign would have been sorely disappointed. Contributions from rank and file union members were tightly restricted by AEU officials and the agenda purposely loaded up with unessential items.

The suppression of discussion indicates that the union bureaucracy, anxious to avoid a direct political struggle against the state and federal Labor governments, is determined to contain the campaign and wind it up.

Opening the meeting, Victorian AEU president Mary Bluett reported that more than 5,000 teachers had joined the union since last November and that wide participation in the strike had closed down 120 schools. Her address was followed by a choir singing satirical songs and a lengthy wisecracking speech by *Age* newspaper columnist Catherine Deveny, a well-known supporter of the Rudd government. Deveny has written on the growing shortage of teachers across the state, but her inclusion on the platform was completely superfluous.

The most notable omission at the meeting was any mention by union officials of the chronic crisis facing contract teachers, who now make up about 20 percent of the teaching workforce. At the mass meeting last November, a young contract teacher had outlined what they face. Her report resonated with many at the meeting, adding to the pressure on the union for the situation to be addressed and raising the question of how it had come about in the first place.

Many of those present at the February 14 meeting were young contract teachers participating in strike action for the first time. They face insecurity of employment, are constantly shifted from one school to another, and do not have the benefits of permanent teachers.

In her address, AEU national president Susan Hopgood contrasted the conditions of Victorian teachers with those in New South Wales—an experienced teacher in Victoria is paid \$65,414 a year, compared with \$72,000 in NSW.

Hopgood claimed the problem that the Victorian AEU faced in previous negotiations was a result of the "WorkChoices environment"—the industrial relations laws introduced by the previous federal Liberal government in 2006, which enshrined harsher restrictions on workers' rights.

In fact, most of the attacks on teachers and on public education in Victoria were imposed through enterprise work agreements brokered by the AEU, well before 2006. In 2004, the AEU signed off on the *Victorian Government Schools Agreement* which surrendered a raft of conditions, including any definite ceiling on class sizes or the amount of classes taught, and sanctioned a sharp increase in the proportion of contract teaching positions.

Hopgood said that the AEU had endorsed the election of the Rudd government last year in order to remove the "recalcitrant government" of Prime Minister John Howard. But having backed the Rudd government, the AEU, like other unions, will now line up to impose its demands—including wage restraint and higher productivity in the so-called fight against inflation.

On February 2, after addressing an Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) meeting, Rudd told the Fairfax Media Network: "I spoke to a gathering of trade union leaders in Canberra last night and ... I was pretty blunt about the fact that we've all got to fight the fight against inflation—it's going to mean some very tough decisions for us all this year...it's quite clear that (wage) restraint is necessary." ACTU president Sharan Burrow immediately declared that the union movement would "play its part".

Neither Hopgood nor any other official speaker referred to the federal government's demand for wage restraint, let alone what it would mean for teachers whose pay claim poses a direct challenge to Rudd's agenda.

AEU President Bluett then reviewed the negotiations that had taken place since the previous agreement expired in December 2006, including the refusal of the Brumby government to go beyond its 3.25 percent offer that does not even match the official 3.5 percent inflation rate.

While the AEU has branded the government offer a "wage cut", the official resolution contained no proposal to escalate industrial action, outside a series of regional half-day stoppages, or to convene any future mass meetings.

As with past campaigns, the AEU's aim is to wear down teachers' resistance and then reach an accommodation with the government. The resolution pointedly referred to "the productivity already delivered by teachers"—a thinly-veiled message that the AEU had delivered on

government demands in the past and would do so again.

Only two speakers from the floor were allowed, and neither opposed the official resolution. Although Bluett, who chaired the meeting, acknowledged that Socialist Equality Party (SEP) member Will Marshall, a teacher from Footscray City Secondary College, had indicated that he wished to speak against the resolution, she claimed another teacher had the call first.

Marshall spoke at the November 14 meeting, where he reviewed the AEU's record of imposing the state government's demands, outlining an alternate campaign of industrial and political action to defend teachers' conditions and oppose the ongoing attacks on public education.

Bluett moved a gag motion to prevent Marshall speaking, desperate to block any discussion about the development of an independent struggle against the pro-business agenda of the Rudd and Brumby governments. The AEU's official resolution was carried, with a small number of teachers voting in opposition and a larger minority abstaining.

Significantly, on February 15, just one day after the strike meeting, state Education Minister Bronwyn Pike declared that teachers would have to pay for any salary increase with productivity offsets and demanded that they give up a week of their annual leave. "We'd like teachers to come back to school before the students so they can talk together in teams, plan in teams, and improve the quality of their programs," she said.

Pike's arrogant declaration demonstrates that the government is confident that the AEU leadership has no intention of leading any genuine campaign for teachers' claims and will work to secure the demands of the Brumby and Rudd governments.

This underscores the urgency of the political issues raised by the Socialist Equality Party in a leaflet distributed at the meeting. The leaflet explained the need for a socialist strategy and called on teachers to "take their struggle out of the hands of the AEU leadership and extend their actions to include parents, students and all working people". It pointed to the need for teachers "to link up with every other section of the working class now facing industrial closures, soaring interest rates and rising prices" and declared that "With Rudd's government determined to impose the full burden of the worsening global economic crisis on the working class, a mass independent political movement of working people must be built—one that challenges the very basis of the capitalist system itself."

After the meeting a number of teachers spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Lakhvir Singh, a Mathematics teacher on contract at Mill Park Secondary College, pointed out the problems facing contract teachers.

"Since starting teaching I have put every effort into getting an ongoing position. Every time you get a new contract you don't know if you are going to be paid for the holidays. This has been going on for me since 2004. I was first at Bacchus Marsh Secondary College then I was moved to Grange College in Hoppers Crossing and now Mill Park College. Every year I am moving from one side of the city to the other. For 16 months I could not get a contract so I was working as a CRT (relief teacher).

"I have two children who are in high school and I have a mortgage to pay. We can't ever take holidays because we never have enough money. I think the government needs to get rid of contract teaching, give teachers rights—we deserve it. With casual labour there is always a fear whether you have a job at the end of the year. I believe teachers are very sincere with their work; you always prepare your classes. You have to work hard. No teacher goes to work without preparation."

John Box, a Politics and English teacher from Footscray City College, said that the meeting gave the impression that support for the official motion "was a foregone conclusion from the start". "Mary Bluett began by saying that teachers from Mildura had already voted for the AEU motion, meaning that we should too. I thought it was pretty rough that people were stopped from speaking.

"The actual time devoted to discussion I think was about 5 percent of the meeting. It was really just token discussion. It was mainly showcasing what was going to happen before it actually happened. I've been going to these meetings for about four years, and every time it seems it is more like a concert or an event. Everyone at the meetings is completely passive and it is a one way street. You have nothing to contribute.

Even the placards at the meeting did not mention much about contract teaching which is something I personally feel very strongly about. Perhaps a deal is in the pipeline".

Ollie Gordon, who teaches Philosophy, Science and Mathematics at Dandenong High School, said: "I was quite peeved that there were so many guest speakers not really speaking to any motion or action. Singing songs and shouting chants can be done at the end of the march, it should not be in the meeting.

"Debate was stifled by Mary Bluett—people from the floor who wished to speak on such an important campaign weren't given voice. There was no real democratic participation. Even on procedure she didn't ask for those against the gag to vote. What the executive did was a prelude to what we might expect to be a sell-out.

"Fourteen people from my school sat together and 11 of them voted against the motion in the end—because most of them were very aware that the log of claims was much the same as 2004 and they weren't satisfied we were going to get any better than we did then. A couple changed their minds against the motion because they didn't like the gagging of debate.

"It was the first time that four of them had attended a mass meeting and they were quite impressed by the solidarity of the teachers. But mostly teachers from our branch did not feel that they were putting any pressure on the government—they'd done a day's pay and might lose another half day's pay.

"Our school is in the process of an amalgamation with two others—Cleeland Secondary College and Doveton Secondary College—and there is no regard for all the stress that this change brings upon us. We will all be on one site at Dandenong, which is by far the smallest area of the three schools—and the student enrolment is estimated at 2,100.

"Being in such a large school could become really awful. There are going to be seven "schools within schools" which is the latest buzz word in Britain. That will mean team teaching, "classrooms without walls" with 50-70 students, and probably isolation from other staff.

"A number of contract teachers did not get their contracts renewed—they were simply washed out of the way, even though they could have been absorbed easily. On top of that, over the last 18 months at Dandenong at least nine experienced and most senior teachers have left, nearly all for private schools. That is the loss of expertise and qualifications for senior subjects".



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