

Australia: teachers continue strike action against Victorian Labor government

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Teachers in Victorian government schools are continuing a campaign of industrial action against the state Labor government of Premier John Brumby. In addition, a series of well attended half day regional stoppages has been held, with at least 4,000 Catholic school teachers participating in a strike meeting on March 7.

The Catholic teachers struck in support of the Victorian Independent Education Union (VIEU), which has benchmarked its wage claim to the outcome of the campaign by the Australian Education Union for improved wages and conditions for the state's public teachers. Demands include a 30 percent wage rise over three years, a maximum of 20 students per class, and an increase in full-time positions to reduce the number of contract teachers.

The Brumby government has responded by offering a 3.25 percent rise annually for three years—a sum that amounts to a pay cut when inflation is taken into account.

Members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party distributed copies of a *World Socialist Web Site* article, “Australia: Victorian teachers face fight with Labor governments over pay and conditions,” at a number of the work stoppages.

The article warned: “A serious campaign on these long-outstanding issues will require a direct political struggle against the state Labor government, as well as the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.... Teachers need a socialist strategy, one that confronts the underlying political questions. They need to link up with every other section of the working class now facing industrial closures, soaring interest rates and rising prices. 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.”

The Australian Education Union (AEU) is determined to prevent the development of such a movement. The union, having backed the election of the Rudd government last December, is above all concerned to politically disarm teachers and block the emergence of any opposition to the state and federal Labor governments. Industrial action has centred on limited protests aimed at appealing to various Labor parliamentarians.

A stop work meeting involving north western metropolitan schools was held outside John Brumby's electoral office on February 26. AEU president Mary Bluett told the 500 assembled teachers that while Prime Minister Rudd had called for wage “restraint”, Victorian teachers had suffered such restraint since 2006. Conveniently, Bluett made no mention of the AEU's record in presiding over their deteriorating wages and conditions, nor did she raise the Australian Council of Trade Unions' pledge to Rudd to help suppress wages.

At Moonee Ponds West Primary School teachers organised a protest when education minister Bronwyn Pike visited the school to open a new gymnasium. [photo]

A further meeting earlier this month was held outside Victorian finance minister Tim Holding's office. AEU vice president Brian Henderson said that the rolling stop work meetings were a great success, and added that it was important to meet outside Holding's office, since “no negotiations could be made without bean counters.” He added that if the government would not negotiate “we will continue our action”.

No more stoppages, however, will be take place over

the next month, due to Easter and term holidays. Undoubtedly the AEU is hoping that this break in momentum will help dissipate teachers' anger and determination to fight for their claim. In the meantime, negotiations between the union and government have resumed.

Teachers at a number of stop work meetings spoke to WSWS reporters.

Carolyn Sarnecka, a woodwork teacher at Roxburgh Park Secondary College, participated in the demonstration outside Brumby's electoral office. Carolyn was particularly concerned with the crisis facing contract teachers, who now constitute about 20 percent of the teaching workforce and have no job or income security and are forced to constantly shift from one school to another.

"I was on contract for seven years and at the end of every single year I wouldn't have any money and I didn't know if I would have another job," she said. "So it is very stressful—you work your butt off all year and at the end of the year they say, 'Sorry, there's no job for you, there are not enough students to keep your position open.'

"For a couple of years I was doing maternity leave replacements, so when these teachers came back there was no job there. I've been teaching in that time at six different schools. I went for a job interview at one school and afterwards I spoke to the principal and he said to me: 'Why do you think I'm going to employ you? Why should I give you a job when you've been to so many different schools and had so many one year contracts?' He actually said that to me on the phone! I was dumbfounded. I couldn't actually believe he was saying that to me. It was as though it was my fault. It's not easy. I've had so many contracts; I can't remember which school is which."

When asked why she thought the government had rejected the teachers' demands, Carolyn replied, "Where is the profit in schools? That's why they won't give us the wages we want. Because they're not making any money out of schools—the money is going to big business where it can make a profit ...

"I feel that in teaching, we're struggling even to get materials for teaching, to try and teach the kids something. One of the schools I taught at had nothing at all. I was going round to schools that were being demolished to get construction materials to use in my

classes. The kids need more resources, extra teachers are needed. You do need smaller class ratios. Many of the kids in the classroom do need one-on-one help. I've got kids in Year 9 or 10 who can barely read or write."

Malcolm, an older contract teacher who formerly worked in a bank, demonstrated outside the electoral office of transport minister Lyn Kosky in Altona Meadows at an inner west stoppage on March 5.

"I initially helped out in the classroom and I enjoyed that much more than the bank so I decided to do something that contributed more," he said. "At university we were told that we would only be on contract for a maximum of two years. That hasn't proven to be the case. I have had to reapply for my job for two years now. It's almost a luxury now—a permanent position. I am an older worker with a mortgage. If my wife didn't have a well paid job we'd be in trouble. I don't know how younger teachers will ever own homes.... I was a little disappointed in the last major rally with the union. It wasn't about contract teachers, class sizes so much. Instead it was about getting ten percent [more pay]."

At the March 7 stoppage which involved about 250 Catholic schools, and completely shut down 65 of them, Peter Wilson from St Bernards College wore a handmade T-shirt with the slogan, "You act like the Pharaoh Brumby. We're not your slaves."

"The government thinks they can get away with it, because they know teachers care, and they use that," he told the WSWS. "I've been teaching over 30 years, and I get not one cent extra for extra qualifications I've earned. I have three degrees, including a Masters, in education related fields. I paid for them myself and I did them in my own time. My brother is a storeman and he gets more money than I do. I don't have a problem with him being properly paid—but there's no parity here. Any other jobs receive proper recompense. I'm not after a fortune, but it is the injustice."



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