

Australia: The 2008 Victorian teachers' dispute, Teachers Alliance and the Socialist Equality Party

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The World Socialist Web Site is publishing an interview with Mary Merkenich, a leading member of the Teachers Alliance organisation, on the recent struggle waged by Victorian public school teachers for improved wages and conditions. A comment by Socialist Equality Party member and public school teacher Will Marshall follows.

The year-long industrial campaign—involving rolling stoppages and protests and two mass meetings—centred on a series of demands, including a 30 percent pay rise over three years, a reduction in class sizes to 20 pupils, and the provision of permanent positions for those employed on contracts. Last May, however, the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the state Labor government announced a new three-year industrial agreement which contained nothing on class sizes, entrenched contract teaching, and delivered a substantial real wage cut for many teachers. In the face of enormous anger from many ordinary teachers—expressed in widely circulated emails and blog postings analysing different aspects of the sell-out—the union sought to ram through the agreement by suppressing discussion through the convening of antidemocratic delegates' meetings ahead of a state-wide ballot held in all public schools. The AEU bitterly opposed the demand raised by members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party for mass meetings to be held to allow a debate on the terms of the proposed agreement.

Only after the union leadership had suppressed a proper discussion and intimidated teachers into believing there was no choice but to ratify the deal, was the agreement formally ratified in July. This was carried out in two stages—firstly through a series of highly orchestrated AEU delegates' meetings, and then through a state-wide ballot of all teachers, union and non-union members.

Throughout the struggle and in the aftermath of its betrayal, the SEP sought to clarify the critical political issues involved—above all, the need for teachers, and the working class as a whole, to make a decisive political break from the Labor Party and the trade unions and turn towards an alternative socialist perspective. The WSWS is publishing an abridged transcript of the discussion with Mary Merkenich to further advance this clarification. It provides an opportunity to review the lessons of the teachers' dispute and to outline the principled political basis of the SEP's intervention, which was the antithesis of the approach of the Teachers Alliance.

Merkenich is one of several Teachers Alliance members who sit on the AEU's state council; in 2006 she stood as the sole opposition candidate to the union's state president Mary Bluett and received 27 percent of the vote. She is also a long-standing member of the Democratic Socialist Perspective (DSP), the leading affiliate group within the Socialist Alliance.

WSWS: What is your assessment of what this agreement means for

teachers and for the public education system as a whole?

Mary Merkenich: Firstly, for teachers it is a divisive agreement and it has already caused lots of divisions within staffrooms, within schools, within the union itself. It serves to undermine the solidarity of teachers within the AEU and probably ultimately will serve—as long as this leadership is in control of the union—to undermine the union and the union's ability to fight for real improvements in conditions and wages for teachers in the future and also to improve the state education system.

In real terms it's done absolutely nothing to improve teachers' conditions. It has increased the pay for teachers right at the top of the salary scale, expert teachers, and also for graduate teachers, but all the other teachers really have not received any more than the inflation rate and what the government actually promised us right from the start. So for them, if they hadn't gone on strike, they would have received what they're receiving now. And I think all teachers lose out because, as I said, it doesn't address our working conditions at all and has sold out contract teachers.

And on the effect on public education—it's done absolutely nothing to address funding for the state system. It undermines the union's ability right here and now, but also into the future, to fight to improve it. And there is no extra money for funding to government schools, so government schools are going to be really strapped to improve not only the working conditions of their teacher workers, but also to offer anything better to their students.

WSWS: What was your assessment of the delegates' meetings? What did you think about how they were convened and run?

MM: Well I went to two. I went to the one at Abbotsford where your member Sue Phillips spoke. And I agreed with everything she said. I thought what she said was absolutely correct. That firstly, the process was totally undemocratic because different schools were voting in a different way. Some schools were tying the delegates—I think Sue pointed this all out—some schools weren't tying the delegates, some schools were doing half-half, so the process itself was flawed and undemocratic. And then of course in the ratification meetings themselves, Bluett and [AEU Secretary Brian] Henderson got up again, and because they control the meetings, they can make sure that the person who moves the motion has a lot of time to distort, to manipulate, etc. Henderson spoke, it was called a report but really, again, it was threats and distortions and the usual stuff. And that also happened at the other meeting I went to, which was in Eltham.

WSWS: Given what you've raised regarding the antidemocratic character of the delegates' meetings, why was it that when the AEU reported a majority in favour of the deal, you sent out a mass email on behalf of the Teachers Alliance which accepted the legitimacy of the result, declared the industrial campaign over, and did not call for a no vote at the subsequent ballot held in schools throughout the state?

MM: Well, once the deal had been signed it was a done deal. And we knew, we heard from many teachers, that they were going to vote yes because they felt it was a done deal, that the campaign had been undermined. So we felt at this stage that what we've got to do is garner all the forces that were in opposition—and maybe even some of the people who voted yes, not because they supported it but because they felt they had to—to go to the next stage, which is to say that this is going to happen again and again unless we get rid of this leadership. So we could see that we had to move on to the next stage.

Why didn't we call for a no vote? Because we felt that once there had been a debate within the union and despite the fact that it wasn't the most democratic debate, but the majority of members had voted and had debated, that then to call for non-union... for people to vote no, where there were non-union members involved as well, would be wrong. Personally I still voted no, and my school sub-branch when we held the ballot also had a presentation explaining the agreement and I slanted it totally so that people could see that they should vote no.

WSWS: Why is it wrong to call on teachers who are not AEU members to vote against the agreement?

MM: Well, because we feel that the union has discussed it, has debated, has voted, and then to say that they should then vote against it is just not a democratic process.

WSWS: But I thought we agreed that what was not a democratic process was the way in which the union ratified this agreement. You say that union members voted on it, but—

MM: I agree that that wasn't... that the process was flawed. I totally agree with you. However, if we want to show people what should be a democratic process then, for example, say if a group of us were in leadership, socialists, who were trying to run the union in a democratic way and we then had a group within it who were opposing everything that we were doing and called on non-unionists, people—scabs, you know scabs, who refuse to join the union, who refuse to go out on strike, to then oppose things that union members had voted yes to, I think that would be wrong. And so we're trying to show them now how a democratic union should be run.

WSWS: It's quite extraordinary to be calling ordinary teachers in the public education system, who choose not to join the AEU, scabs. You said the agreement was a done deal, but in fact there was the opportunity for this agreement to be struck down if a majority had voted no. To deliberately refuse to call on teachers to vote against the deal in these circumstances is quite an extraordinary thing to do.

MM: Well no, because we called on unionists to vote against it. We campaigned against it, we explained our reasons. But we were not going to say this to non-unionists, who I do regard as scabs because they did scab on us, they didn't go on strike.

WSWS: The Socialist Equality Party raised throughout the campaign the need for teachers to begin to build an independent political challenge to the Labor governments at both the state and federal level. This was something noticeably absent from Teachers Alliance material. The central focus was instead on pressuring the AEU leadership. For example, your "Vote No" leaflet distributed at some of the delegates' meetings, stated: "If this divisive agreement is voted down, this will force the leadership to go back and negotiate a better deal that includes genuine pay rises for all and improve everyone's conditions."

MM: If many people within the AEU had been active, and had gone along to meetings and—before just this campaign—been more active in their sub-branches, and more of them were on AEU council, then I think the possibility of forcing Henderson and Bluett to do better than what they've done was certainly there. But at the moment, a lot of members have already been demoralised by this leadership, or—if they're newer teachers—have not felt attracted to join the union because it just seems so irrelevant and to be doing very little for them or state education. Then

there's very little pressure on Brian Henderson or Mary Bluett and their cohorts in the leadership to do anything.

WSWS: And the question of the Labor Party?

MM: The Labor Party needs to be gotten rid of. The Labor Party is an obstacle, totally.

WSWS: Why is it not raised then in the course of the campaign by the Teachers Alliance?

MM: I guess it's a tactical question again. We just saw that our main focus was on attacking what we saw as... what the leadership was doing.

WSWS: Internationally, over the past two to three decades, there's been a transformation of the old workers' organisations—the trade unions, the labour and social-democratic parties. These are now right-wing instruments of big business. Under conditions of the globalisation of the profit system, within which capital is free to roam the globe in pursuit of the most profitable environment, the trade unions have nowhere responded by defending workers' conditions, but rather have collaborated with the destruction of jobs, with the suppression of wages, and with the tearing up of conditions. This is an objective relationship. To ignore all this and simply reduce everything to the leadership of Bluett and Henderson leads to a completely false and opportunist orientation.

MM: Well we... within the DSP, or within Socialist Alliance, if we had an analysis of what was going on, we'd say all those things that you just said, about the old workers' parties going to the right, and many of the trade union leaderships playing that role, or some of the trade unions playing more of a mixed role—being progressive on some issues but still class collaborationist on other issues. But within Teachers Alliance, you're dealing with so many different levels of consciousness, that we're trying to take people at the consciousness that they are, and then as much as possible pull them—or not pull them, I don't want to sound patronising—but help them to broaden and deepen their consciousness about what is really going on. So I guess we just see it as a tactical way, or to use the Trotskyist phrase as a transitional way, of reaching people and getting them involved in more than just trade union politics ultimately.

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Will Marshall comments:

Mary Merkenich's remarks on the recent Victorian teachers' dispute underscore the utterly opportunist politics of the Socialist Alliance, whose members play the leading roles in Teachers Alliance. Far from representing any kind of alternative to the union leadership, Teachers Alliance functions as its "left" accomplices.

It is a matter of record that the only organised and conscious opposition to the Australian Education Union's sell-out industrial agreement was that provided by members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party. When negotiations between the AEU and the state Labor government of Premier John Brumby commenced in late 2007, the SEP warned that the bureaucracy was preparing a rotten deal directed against teachers and against the public education system as a whole. When the terms of the agreement were finally released, the SEP actively campaigned for teachers to vote it down, while at the same time demanding that mass meetings be convened to allow them to freely discuss the agreement and then cast a fully informed vote.

At the first delegates' meeting, SEP member Sue Phillips interrupted standing orders and moved a resolution calling on everyone present, whether they were for or against the agreement, to defend the democratic right of all teachers to participate in a proper debate at a mass meeting. Such a discussion, Phillips explained, was necessary to clarify the torrent of lies and misinformation issued by the AEU concerning the terms of the agreement. Teachers would then be able to vote on the agreement after learning what was really involved. But the bureaucracy refused to allow delegates to consider this motion and ruled it "out of order". The SEP subsequently exposed the AEU's thoroughly undemocratic manoeuvres and issued a statement calling on all teachers to disregard the purported

delegates' vote and vote no. This struggle won significant support. The union felt compelled to respond, with President Mary Bluett distributing a mass email replying to the SEP's June 20 statement, "Why Victorian teachers should vote 'no' to the AEU-Labor government agreement".

No such reply to the Teachers Alliance was necessary. Merkenich claims to agree with Sue Phillips and the SEP on the antidemocratic character of the delegates' meetings—but when the AEU published the purported result of the delegates' votes she immediately acknowledged their legitimacy and declared the industrial campaign over. The rush by Teachers Alliance to align itself with the union leadership exposed the bogus character of its previous nominal opposition to the agreement.

Merkenich's absurd defence that this was aimed at providing a shining example of union democracy in action reflects a fetishistic conception of the trade unions. This emerges again and again in Merkenich's remarks—from her concern that the new agreement will "undermine the union" to her claim that if only sufficient pressure had been brought to bear upon the AEU bureaucracy it would have delivered "genuine pay rises for all and improve everyone's conditions".

Nowhere is the preoccupation with the current union framework articulated more clearly—and grotesquely—than in her denunciation of teachers outside the union as "scabs" and in her adamant refusal to appeal to such teachers to vote down the industrial agreement. Merkenich's vitriol reflects the extent to which she—along with countless other ex-radicals of her generation, politicised in the late 1960s and early 1970s—has been integrated into the trade union apparatus and shares the bureaucracy's cynical and contemptuous attitude towards ordinary workers.

The AEU has a decades-long record of betrayals and sell-outs, and has actively collaborated with successive Labor and Liberal governments in Victoria to shut down schools, sack teachers, and undermine the public system. Unsurprisingly, large numbers of teachers, particularly young teachers, refuse to fork over dues to an organisation that many instinctively sense represents interests contrary to their own. The task confronting teachers, and the working class as a whole, is to develop new forms of organisation based on an entirely different political perspective.

Merkenich presents the problem as though it were simply a matter of insufficient militancy, insufficient pressure upon Bluett and Henderson. But over the past three decades, the trade unions in every country, without exception, have offered their services to their respective national bourgeoisies in destroying jobs and entire industries, suppressing wages, and undermining working conditions. In previous periods the unions operated within the framework of the national economy and worked to extract concessions through industrial action and political pressure; this national-reformist perspective, however, has been shattered by the ever closer integration of the world economy. The unions now function as the handmaidens of international finance capital, preserving their considerable privileges by functioning as industrial policemen—isolating and suppressing any resistance within the working class.

Moreover, as the SEP stressed throughout the teachers' dispute, the campaign was not simply a "trade union struggle". At stake was the future of the public education system itself. A critical component of the agreement was the AEU's endorsement of the Victorian Labor government's "Education Blueprint" which binds education to the demands of business for greater productivity through a regime of constant standardised testing, school closures and amalgamations, and moves towards performance pay for both principals and teachers. Essentially the same agenda has since been adopted and extended by the federal Labor government. Embracing the right-wing program unveiled by the former Howard government in 2004, but which it proved unable to implement, Rudd is set to rapidly accelerate the assault on the public system.

Labor's "education revolution" is a central component of its drive to boost productivity and improve Australian capitalism's "international

competitiveness". Rudd won the support of critical sections of the ruling elite during last November's election campaign after he pledged to launch a new wave of "free market" economic reforms that Howard proved unable to deliver. Now the Labor government is tasked with placing the mounting economic crisis—triggered by the collapse of the US sub-prime mortgage sector and world financial markets' turmoil—on the backs of ordinary working people with social spending slashed and real wages driven down.

None of these issues was raised by Teachers Alliance during the Victorian teachers' dispute.

Incapable of discussing the essential political issues, the organisation instead encouraged teachers to view their struggle in the most parochial, narrow, and purely trade union terms. This is ultimately a reflection of the political perspective and class character of the Democratic Socialist Perspective (DSP) and the Socialist Alliance (SA).

The SA was launched as an electoral bloc in 2001 by several radical and protest groups with the perspective of ensuring that the growing disgust and alienation of workers and young people towards the major parties remained within the existing political framework. The guiding principle of the SA was to have no principles. Instead petty bourgeois radicals, former Stalinists, identity-based protest groups, disaffected Laborites, and "militant" trade union bureaucrats were all to be united around a national-reformist "common action platform". In line with this anti-working class orientation, the SA has actively promoted different union leaders in its newspaper, covered for their rotten manoeuvres and betrayals, and in return has received significant sums of money from sections of the union bureaucracy.

From the outset, the central task the SA set for itself was the return of a Labor government. Last year it campaigned for Rudd's installation as prime minister, promoting lingering illusions that this would mark some step forward for the working class, or would at least represent a "lesser evil" to the Liberal-National coalition government. The Socialist Equality Party—which explained that both Labor and Liberal were the right-wing representatives of big business and that the working class had to build its own party—was bitterly denounced for refusing to allocate its electoral "preferences" to the Laborites.

Merkenich's claim that the silence on the part of Teachers Alliance on the Labor Party was a "tactical" issue is false. The refusal to mount a political challenge to the government was an expression of the SA's program and perspective, not its tactics. With Labor in power at both the federal and state level, the immediate objectives of the SA have been realised; this is also why the Teachers Alliance, which has long postured as an opposition tendency to the AEU leadership, in fact played a largely passive role during the recent teachers' struggle and was hardly heard from at many of the delegates' meetings.

Merkenich invokes the Trotskyist movement's transitional demands as an alibi for her organisation's opportunism, insisting that Teachers Alliance tries to "take people at the consciousness that they are", after which it may be possible to "get them involved in more than just trade union politics ultimately".

Emptying Leon Trotsky's *Transitional Program*, the founding document of the Fourth International, of its socialist and revolutionary content has long been the stock in trade of various revisionist tendencies. Trotsky in fact repeatedly emphasised that the starting point for a socialist organisation's transitional demands—such as the sliding scale of wages and hours, the opening up of corporate records for workers' inspection—is the objective, historical tasks confronting the working class, not the existing level of political consciousness. The revolutionary party always tells the working class the truth and never proceeds from an impressionistic (and therefore sceptical and false) assessment of the current consciousness of this or that worker.

"To begin with this mentality as the fundamental fact would signify not

a scientific but a conjunctural, demagogic, or adventuristic policy,” Trotsky explained. “What can a revolutionary party do in this situation? In the first place give a clear, honest picture of the objective situation, of the historic tasks which flow from this situation, irrespective of whether or not the workers are today ripe for this. Our tasks don’t depend on the mentality of the workers. The task is to develop the mentality of the workers. This is what the program should formulate and present before the advanced workers”.

Seven decades on, these words retain all their vitality and remain the cornerstone of the political and practical work of the Socialist Equality Party.



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