

# Australia: School teachers to strike in Victoria

Frank Gaglioti, Patrick O'Connor  
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About 20,000 primary and secondary public school teachers in Victoria are expected to strike tomorrow. The Australian Education Union (AEU) has organised the industrial action, including a mass meeting and a rally to parliament, following a breakdown in its negotiations on a new enterprise bargaining agreement with the state Liberal government.

Before being elected in 2010, Premier Ted Baillieu promised to make Victorian teachers, currently among the lowest paid in Australia, the highest paid. Immediately after taking office, however, he junked his pledge, along with a commitment not to impose any public sector sackings. His state government has imposed a 2.5 percent wage ceiling on all public sector workers, a significant real pay cut.

The government has also issued a list of so-called productivity demands. It wants already overworked teachers in larger secondary schools to fit in an extra hour of classroom teaching each week, and hopes to eliminate the current system of near-automatic progression up the pay scale. Whereas now 99.8 percent of teachers receive annual increment increases, the government wants a cap of 80 percent. This is aimed at reducing the government's wages bill and intimidating the workforce. Any teacher deemed to be "underperforming" may never move up the pay scale, which for new teachers currently begins at an annual salary of just under \$57,000.

The Liberal government is also demanding the introduction of an across-the-board "performance pay" system. It wants 30 percent of teachers to receive wage bonuses of between 6 to 10 percent and another 40 percent of teachers to receive a 1.4 percent bonus, based on meeting targets to lift "classroom standards". The purpose is to divide the teaching workforce and further entrench the federal Labor government's regressive standardised testing regime—the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy

(NAPLAN) scheme. Performance bonuses will likely be tied to NAPLAN results, leading to more "teaching to the test" rote learning.

The AEU's log of claims includes the demand for a 10 percent wage rise each year over three years, maximum class sizes of 20 students, a cap on face-to-face teaching hours of 20.5 hours a week in primary schools and 18 hours in secondary, and a reduction in the number of contract teachers.

These demands are simply hot air—the AEU has no intention of waging a genuine campaign to secure a single one of them. The union bureaucracy has played a critical role in the degradation of the public education system under successive Labor and Liberal governments, which is why Victorian teachers have some of the worst working conditions in Australia and the state has the lowest education funding per student in the country.

Victoria also has a very high rate of contract teachers in the public system, nearly 20 percent of the total, and around half of all new teachers are on contracts. First introduced in the 1990s, contracts allow principals to effectively hire-and-fire a layer of teachers at will. As a result, thousands of predominantly young teachers face chronic employment insecurity. The AEU has blatantly sold them out in every enterprise bargaining agreement negotiated during the past 20 years.

On the wages issue, the AEU had promoted illusions in Baillieu's pre-election promise to make Victorian teachers the country's best paid. The union then feigned outrage when the predictable u-turn was announced. It has declared that an annual 2.5 percent increase is inadequate—yet under the last EBA the AEU agreed to nominal wage rises in the three years from 2009 to 2011 of just 2.71 percent. The 2008 agreement was only imposed, in the face of widespread opposition among teachers, through a series of undemocratic manoeuvres.

The Baillieu government has dismissed out of hand the current 30 percent pay claim over three years, claiming it will cost \$14 billion. Last month the government handed down an austerity budget that included 4,200 public service layoffs and the slashing of the Education Department's budget by \$481 million, including 300 sackings of literacy, numeracy and information technology coaches, and Aboriginal specialists.

Baillieu has also targeted the TAFE (Technical and Further Education) system, cutting spending by \$300 million and accelerating the privatisation of the sector. About 1,500 TAFE teachers and staff are expected to be sacked as a result. The AEU covers both TAFE and school teachers—yet it has blocked any coordinated action in opposition to the Liberal government's attacks.

The union is deliberately isolating the school teachers from other sections of workers in Victoria and nationally who face similar attacks. For much of last year, the AEU leadership held closed doors negotiations with the government at the same time as public hospital nurses were waging a determined struggle in defence of their wages and conditions. It was only after the Australian Nursing Federation sold out the campaign that the AEU announced that it would be organising limited industrial action in the schools.

Teachers in Victoria confront a political struggle—against the state Liberal and federal Labor governments. Baillieu's education agenda is entirely in line with Gillard's so-called "education revolution", which seeks to expand the private education sector, entrench a "user pays" model at every level, and narrow the curriculum to meet the demands of business. Moreover, Baillieu's budget cuts are part of the drive in every state, by Labor and Liberal administrations alike, to slash spending on basic social services and deliver budget surpluses for the financial markets.

The Victorian teachers' struggle to secure decent wages and working conditions is inseparable from the struggle to defend the public education system itself. This fight can only be waged to the extent that it is taken out of the hands of the AEU. In every school and community, committees of action must be formed, mobilising teachers, students and parents and turning out to other sections of workers, in the first place TAFE and university staff facing the same attacks.

Such a political struggle must be based on a new perspective—one that begins not with what the "market" can afford but rather with providing the resources necessary for a public education system that is capable of developing the intellectual, creative and physical talents and capacities of all young people. This requires the development of an independent political movement of the working class fighting for a workers' government and the reorganisation of society on a socialist basis.

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The following resolution will be put to the Victorian teachers' mass meeting on June 7 by members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party. We urge all teachers to support it.

1. That this meeting rejects the entire education agenda of the Baillieu Liberal government and the Gillard Labor government as a fundamental attack on public education and the working conditions of teachers.

2. We oppose the Baillieu government's 2.5 percent public sector wage ceiling, performance pay, increased teaching hours and all productivity trade-offs. We demand smaller class sizes and permanency for all teachers, with an end to contract teaching. We call for a boycott of the Gillard government's NAPLAN testing regime, which is based on free market models developed in the US and Britain that led to the privatisation of entire areas of public education.

3. All education sectors are under attack. This meeting calls on all teachers, Education support staff, TAFE and university workers in Victoria and across the country to develop a joint struggle against the budget cuts of the Gillard and state governments, worsening conditions, job destruction and privatisation.

4. We call for the establishment of rank-and-file action committees of teachers, education workers, students and parents in every school to plan out a coordinated industrial and political campaign to defend the right of all young people to a free, high quality public education.



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