

Victorian teachers' union blocks fight against Labor's assault on public education

Our reporters
6 September 2012

Thousands of teachers and school support staff participated in one of the largest strikes in recent years in the Australian state of Victoria yesterday, only to have union officials block and oppose discussion on how to defeat the assault on public education being waged by the federal Labor government and the state Liberal government.

Australian Education Union officials gave the clearest indication of their preparation to sabotage the struggle of teachers by cutting off a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) speaker, Will Marshall, who sought to move a resolution rejecting the union's proposed campaign of further ineffectual bans and protests.

The SEP resolution warned that the union's purpose was not to oppose the governments' plans, but to wear down the determination of teachers and impose a sell-out. It stressed the need to take the struggle out of the hands of the AEU, establish rank and file action committees of teachers, students and parents, and link the defence of public education to the fight for a socialist program.

The one-day strike was held just two days after Prime Minister Julia Gillard, in a speech to the National Press Club, unveiled a major extension to the Labor government's promotion of private schools at the expense of public schools and tying of school funding—including teacher salaries—to students' standardised test results. (See: "Australian government imposes new 'performance' regime on public schools"). At the strike rallies, Australian Education Union (AEU) leaders made clear their support for Gillard's program.

An estimated 50,000 teachers, principals and education support staff went on strike across the state, shutting down over 400 schools, as part of a limited industrial campaign by the AEU to secure a new agreement on pay and working conditions. About 15,000 rallied in Melbourne, and several hundred met in the regional centre of Mildura. They were the first-ever combined meetings of teachers and Education Support (ES) staff.

It was the second one-day stoppage called by the union since it presented a log of claims to Premier Ted Baillieu's

state government nearly 18 months ago, calling for a 30 percent wage increase over three years, lower class sizes and the end of short-term teaching contracts. Negotiations between the government and the union broke down five months ago.

The Baillieu government has insisted on a 2.5-percent annual wage ceiling—which it has imposed on all public sector workers—combined with the introduction of performance-linked pay, increased hours for secondary teachers, and a list of other productivity demands. This assault on teachers is part of a wider austerity program, which includes eliminating 4,200 public sector jobs, slashing the education budget by \$481 million and accelerating the privatisation of Technical and Further Education (TAFE).

After the last mass meeting of teachers in June, which endorsed a series of limited bans, as well as protests outside parliamentarians' offices, the Baillieu government only stepped up its offensive. A "New Directions" discussion paper proposed the appointment of business managers as school principals, the sacking of 5 percent of teachers designated as "under-performing" and the introduction of a differential pay system determined by subjects taught and the completion of professional development courses, to be undertaken during holidays.

This regime intensifies the attacks contained in the previous state Labor government's education "Blueprint," which included forms of performance pay. That plan was fully endorsed by the AEU, and some of its essential features are now being extended nationally by the Gillard government's new school funding and "performance improvement" plan.

Determined to suppress any discussion among teachers about a strategy to oppose the two governments, the union bureaucrats dragged out the meeting for as long as possible and then anti-democratically blocked debate on the SEP resolution.

State AEU president Mary Bluett spoke at great length. She praised the Gillard government's funding model, while condemning the Baillieu government's performance pay

plan as “outrageous”—even though it is entirely in line with Gillard’s scheme.

Likewise, AEU federal president Angelo Gavrielatos hailed Gillard’s model as an “historic decision” to boost public schools, claiming it was the result of “seven years of campaigning by the AEU.”

Will Marshall, a SEP member and long-standing Footscray teacher, moved a procedural motion to change the order of the meeting so that a debate could be held, before the planned musical entertainment. Such entertainment segments have become a tried and tested music method used by the AEU to occupy the bulk of mass meetings and stifle discussion.

Marshall explained: “Teachers and ES staff, who are treated as second class citizens in the schools, and who are under-paid and overworked, have come here today to discuss a way forward to meet the provocative attacks on education by Baillieu and Gillard. The rank and file teachers should be heard, those that have an alternative view.”

AEU leaders opposed the motion, falsely claiming that teachers with alternative views had never been stopped from speaking. The motion was lost.

The official resolution called for further bans and limited rolling stoppages in Term 4, and rallies outside state government members’ offices. When Bluett read out the SEP’s opposing resolution, she rushed through it so quickly that it was impossible for teachers to follow.

In order to assist the union officials suppress any political debate, members of the Teachers and Education Support Alliance, mainly comprised of the pseudo-left Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative groups, moved two minor amendments to the AEU resolution, calling for “significant improvements” in conditions, “as specified in the log of claims,” and another 24-hour stoppage.

The movers of these amendments emphasised that they were absolutely in favour of the official resolution, but just wanted to strengthen it. Tess Lee Ack of Socialist Alternative claimed that “sustained strike action” would match “the gains of the nurses.” In March, after nurses had held stoppages and protests for months, the Australian Nursing Federation—backed by the same “left” groups—struck a sell-out deal with the Baillieu government. The betrayal involved a substantial real wage cut, with the union imposing the government’s 2.5 percent pay ceiling.

AEU officials opposed the pseudo-left amendments, which were lost. The purpose of this phoney debate over tactics was basically to wear teachers down and waste time.

Once the amendments had been dismissed, and the official resolution was finally able to be opposed, the SEP’s Will Marshall started walking to the microphone. AEU official Brian Henderson rushed across the platform. He grabbed the

microphone and called for a procedural motion to put the motion. Without any further debate, it was passed, preventing any opposition from being heard.

After the rally, teachers marched to the state parliament, meeting up with hundreds of Catholic school teachers who had defied a no-strike order from the Gillard government’s Fair Work Australia tribunal.

At parliament, state Labor leader Daniel Andrews was given the platform, even though he refused to promise a decent wage rise for teachers under a future Labor government. His appearance underscored the union’s bid to channel teachers’ discontent into an electoral campaign supporting the eventual return of a Labor government in 2014, which will only deepen Gillard’s assault, and that of the last state Labor administration.

The union’s timetable is designed to keep teachers protesting through next year, and even through to the next state election the following year. AEU president Bluett said teachers would keep protesting for many school terms, whereas Baillieu would be only a “one-term” premier.

Unmoved by the strike, Baillieu reiterated that he would not back down, saying: “There is nothing new in the industrial rhetoric, nor the industrial action that’s been taken today.”

Gillard’s workplace relations minister, Bill Shorten, told the media that the AEU would have to compromise on its pay claim, and offered to intervene to break the deadlock, as he had done with the nurses’ dispute. This is a clear warning that the AEU will call in the federal Labor government to help betray the teachers’ struggle, just as happened to the nurses, in order to clear the path for the Baillieu government’s agenda, as well as the Gillard’s school funding measures and performance-linked pay regime.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact