

Striking teachers and support staff speak out

Our reporters
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Victorian teachers and Education Support (ES) staff spoke with WSWS reporters after yesterday's mass meeting. Numbers voiced their lack of confidence in the Australian Education Union (AEU) and frustration that major issues, such as contract teachers' conditions and the federal Labor government's NAPLAN standardised testing regime, would not be addressed in any enterprise agreement that the AEU struck with the state Liberal government.

Mark, a primary school teacher, said the mass meeting was "poorly organised" and that "about 55 minutes of the meeting was under the guise of the presidential report, which just took up time..."

"There seemed to be a very strong attack on the [Liberal-National] Coalition, but the federal Labor government got off scot-free. Yet the federal government has played a role on a lot of these issues: principal empowerment, evaluation structures of teachers, and pay for performance...You couldn't call them allies of public education, but they don't seem to be held to account."

Mark added: "The union only focused on the state issues...You get the feeling that there's a sense of inevitability that merit pay is going to happen. Like NAPLAN, it isn't something the union is opposed to anymore. I think teachers understand its harmful effects, but the union leadership does not come out against it now. High stakes testing is not an issue spoken about and I think there's starting to be an acceptance of it."

Asked about the forthcoming agreement between the AEU and the state government, Mark replied: "In all honesty I imagine we'll get nothing. There'll be some convoluted way the union will sell it to the membership. There'll be trade-offs and more whittling away of conditions."

"I wouldn't be surprised if some element of pay for performance comes in, and once it's in, it will take

hold. Remember how it was only state testing, then it was federal testing NAPLAN, and then came the *MySchool* site. It's a gradual shift from one thing to another."

Mark explained: "I don't have any faith in the union. Contract teachers in the last agreement were told to ring a particular phone number. We went down that path at our school, but in return we just received a letter from the principal about why there were so many teachers on contract. It was a 'Mickey Mouse' response and nothing happened. I don't think there will be any improvement for teachers out of this agreement on workload, contracts, or pay."

A Northland College of the Arts and Technology teacher said: "I've worked for nearly thirty years as a music teacher, but I'm being made to teach in other subjects. My teaching is spread 0.4 for music and 0.6 maths and science, because I'm qualified in that. The bosses can do anything they like—the principal can do absolutely anything. I wanted to appeal it, but the union reps said, 'no way that you'll be able to change it'."

The teacher pointed to a general decline in public education during his career. "We're very lucky because we have a large music department, so we still get a few hundred dollars per VET [Vocational Education and Training] student, but it's still not enough. It's already a voucher system. At the moment, you get \$7,000 per student, and almost nothing else. Gillard will make it so there's even less time for teaching and preparation."

Asked about the federal Labor government's introduction of standardised testing, he replied: "NAPLAN takes teachers away from what they need to teach and forces them teach to the test and it narrows the curriculum. Not everyone is going to be a doctor or a financier, but that's what the Labor government seems to think. And the Labor Party is totally beholden to big business. They're just the Liberal Party 'light' now."

“I don’t have a problem with training people for jobs but you need an all-rounded education. At the schools I’ve been at in the last couple years, teaching how to be a decent human being is a big part of it, as well as teaching the curriculum. That’s been lost.”

A mathematics and biology teacher at Ringwood Secondary College said she was forced to reapply for a new contract at the end of each quarterly term. “I’ve only been at my school for a couple of months. There are a few of us working like that,” she said.

“I’ve heard the government wants to set schools and teachers against each other using the performance-pay system. In reality, teachers have to work together. It just shows you that these people have nothing to do with education or what’s involved in education.”

An Education Support staff member said the first hour of yesterday’s mass meeting was “a waste of time.”

“The AEU kept announcing how many schools were attending the meeting and how many more numbers the union had than at the last meeting. They just seemed to be going over the same ground again and again.

“The AEU spoke about how we are on contracts but what will actually be done about it? There was a lot of cheering that the ES staff and teachers were together at the meeting but I didn’t see that any solutions on offer.”

She added: “I’ve been working in schools for more than ten years and for the first six or seven years I had to keep re-applying for my job until I was finally made ongoing. There’s no Professional Development or training that can take you up to the next level or the pay-scale. You can only progress upwards by applying for a new job.

“Integration teachers get very little and often work overtime for nothing. They only receive \$31,000 a year with a half hour lunch-break. Nothing has been done for ES staff since I can remember.”



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