

Australia: Victorian teachers' union abandons wage claim

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The Australian Education Union (AEU) last week junked its wage claim for public school teachers in the state of Victoria in an effort to reach agreement with the state Liberal government on a new agreement that erodes teachers' and education support workers' wages and conditions, and further undermines the public education system.

The union leadership, without any prior consultation with ordinary teachers, unilaterally dropped the demand for a 30 percent wage increase over three years to just 12 percent. The government made no concession in return, maintaining its demand for a 2.5 percent annual wage ceiling, the introduction of so-called performance pay, and various "productivity" concessions. The AEU leadership responded by calling off the official negotiations and pleading with Premier Ted Baillieu to cut a deal.

State union president Mary Bluett complained: "The union shifted significantly in these negotiations. We have been trying to resolve this dispute—it's the government that has been intractable."

Closed doors negotiations have been proceeding since September, following a second one day state-wide teachers strike and mass meeting for the wage claim. At that mass meeting, the AEU leadership blocked Socialist Equality Party members, who warned that the union was preparing a sell-out, from moving a resolution calling for the formation of rank-and-file committees of teachers, students and parents to advance a political struggle in defence of teachers' conditions and the public education system as a whole.

The union instead proposed a series of rolling half-day stoppages affecting schools in particular areas at different

times, protests outside government members' electoral offices, and the imposition of a range of work bans. These included non-participation in education department surveys, replying to department emails, and a ban on writing comments on pupils' end of year school reports.

Predictably, the Liberal government has maintained its position in the face of this token campaign. "The 30 percent to the 12 percent still doesn't fit the wages policy," Treasurer Kim Wells declared. "We've said from day one, 2.5 percent plus productivity offset. We've achieved that with the nurses ... we believe we'll achieve this with the teachers. We're [also] pushing very hard for the performance pay for teachers."

The union has ruled out any deal involving so-called performance pay, reflecting overwhelming opposition among teachers towards tying salaries to the outcomes of standardised tests. The AEU, however, has not told teachers about the discussions on other union demands, including lowering class sizes and reducing the large proportion of teachers and education support staff now employed on insecure work contracts.

One issue which has been secretly negotiated by the AEU is the potential sacking of so-called excess teachers. Currently, any teachers deemed "excess" as result of a school's declining enrolments or changes in school curriculum are given priority places for teaching positions in other schools. Now, however, the government wants to force "excess" teachers to apply for advertised positions in competition with other teachers, which is a means of fast tracking teacher redundancies.

The AEU's discussions with the government only came to light via an inadvertent leak from the Teachers and Education Support Alliance (TESA), a union faction led

by members of the pseudo-left organisations Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance. TESA subsequently rushed to comply with an edict from the union leadership that such information should not be disclosed because negotiations had reached a “very delicate point.” This revealing episode only highlights the fact that these ex-lefts function as the loyal defenders of the union bureaucracy not the interests of teachers.

The Baillieu government is determined to inflict a real wage cut on the teachers and deliver an enterprise bargaining agreement that advances its agenda of a privatised, user pays education system.

This month marked the halfway point of the government’s four-year term, after its election in 2010. The unanimous assessment of corporate lobby groups and the media was that Baillieu needed to significantly accelerate his pro-market restructuring measures. The 2.5 percent wage ceiling for all public sector workers is part of the government’s drive to slash public spending and retain Victoria’s AAA credit rating.

At the same time, the Liberal government is collaborating closely with the federal Labor government in enacting new education “reforms” that are aimed at promoting private schools, tying the curriculum ever more closely to the immediate needs of business, and pitting teachers against each other by tying job security, wages, and school resources to standardised test outcomes.

The AEU is fully complicit in all of this. It has kept teachers in the dark about the far reaching significance of the Baillieu government’s two education “discussion papers” released this year. In June, the government unveiled, *“New directions for school leadership and the teaching profession”*, and in November, *“Developing Victoria as a Learning Community.”* Among other highly regressive proposals, the documents call for 5 percent of the total teaching workforce to be summarily sacked as “underperformers”, and for the introduction of “flexible” work and employment arrangements, including the recruitment of business leaders to corporatise schools.

The union has also kept completely silent about the role played by the federal Labor government. Its creation of the NAPLAN standardised tests and MySchool ranking website—with the direct collaboration of the AEU—has driven the rollout of new so-called “performance”

benchmarks at the state level across Australia. The AEU has consistently fostered illusions in the Labor Party, giving a platform to state Labor opposition leader Daniel Andrews at his rallies and promoting the return of a state Labor government at the next election in 2014.

As the union leadership does everything it can to stitch up a deal with the Baillieu government, it has also moved to clamp down further on the limited opportunities for democratic discussion at teachers’ mass meetings. In the latest AEU magazine, state branch secretary Brian Henderson wrote an article complaining that meetings were too long. His proposed solution was not to limit the lengthy introductory speeches by union leaders or to axe the time-wasting musical “entertainment” but to force teachers to submit any resolutions or amendments to the union leadership for prior vetting. Even the present highly restricted opportunities for rank-and-file members to put forward an alternative view are regarded by the union leadership as untenable. The clear target of Henderson’s antidemocratic proposal is the Socialist Equality Party, whose members alone have put resolutions to mass meetings in opposition to the bureaucracy’s perspective.

A defence of public education and securing decent wages and working conditions within schools is impossible while teachers remain straitjacketed within the trade unions. Rank and file action committees of teachers, parents and students must be developed outside and in opposition to the union, to organise a co-ordinated industrial and political campaign against both the Baillieu and Gillard governments, based on the fight for a workers’ government and socialist policies.

The author recommends:

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