

Australia: Victorian teachers prepare for mass meeting and third one-day strike

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As school teachers in Victoria prepare to attend another mass meeting tomorrow, during their third one-day strike since June and September last year, the Australian Education Union (AEU) has stepped up its efforts to block the emergence of a political struggle against the federal Labor and state Liberal governments that are engaged in a coordinated offensive against the public education system.

The AEU bureaucracy has deliberately driven teachers into an impasse in the campaign for a new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA).

The union leadership has done everything possible to accommodate the regressive demands of Premier Ted Baillieu's Liberal government. In November last year, the union unilaterally abandoned the demand for a wage rise of 30 percent over three years, instead asking for just 12 percent. The state government responded by refusing any compromise, maintaining its demand for a steeper real wage cut, in line with its annual 2.5 percent wage ceiling for all public sector workers. The limited industrial action coordinated by the AEU—including the imposition of a work to rule 38-hour week and other work bans—has simply been dismissed by the government.

Baillieu has also demanded a raft of regressive measures aimed at undermining public schools and dividing the teaching workforce, including the introduction of so-called performance pay, increased teaching hours, and other "productivity" concessions. As the EBA negotiations proceeded last year behind closed doors, the state government released two policy papers, "New directions for school leadership and the teaching profession" and "Towards Victoria as a Learning Community", which outlined plans for sacking 5 percent of the total teaching workforce and restricting teachers' annual incremental wage rises.

This agenda has been spearheaded by Prime Minister Julia Gillard's Labor government. Its AEU-endorsed NAPLAN standardised testing regime is the central mechanism through which state governments, both Labor and Liberal, are accelerating their attacks on public education. NAPLAN test results are being increasingly used to target "underperforming" public schools, especially those in working-class areas, for closure or amalgamation; to tie teachers' salaries and continued employment to test outcomes, and to narrow the curriculum, with "teaching to the test" taking priority over students' participation in broader educational, artistic, cultural, and sporting activities that are vital to their all-round development. The wider agenda is to promote the further drift of students into expensive private schools, while government spending on public education is gutted.

The underlying purpose of Labor's so-called "education revolution" is to tie every level of education to the requirements of big business for a productive and exploitable labour force.

In this, Gillard and Baillieu are singing from the same hymn sheet. "Put bluntly, our businesses will be unable to compete if our children's education keeps falling behind," the prime minister has argued. "To win the economic race, we must first win the education race." The state Liberal government justifies its demands in the same terms, with the "New Directions" policy paper explaining that new measures are necessary to "provide Victoria with the global competitive advantage it needs to prosper in a demanding economic climate by driving economic growth and labour productivity."

The AEU's response to this bipartisan offensive against the public education system has been to step up its promotion of Labor.

A draft resolution that the union leadership plans to put to tomorrow's mass meeting is entirely silent on Gillard and the Labor government. The proposed resolution complains that the state Liberal government has failed to "negotiate in good faith and make a reasonable offer." In the face of Baillieu's intransigence, the union proposes to maintain the existing work bans. The only new proposal is for a "wide-ranging political campaign focusing on targeted [Liberal-National] coalition seats, including member and community activities which target coalition politicians" and more half-day rolling work stoppages of teachers in selected regions, "targeting coalition politicians."

This is nothing but a thinly-veiled election campaign for the Labor Party, ahead of the federal election in September this year, and the next state election in November 2014.

Teachers should reject this proposal with contempt. The state Labor opposition, led by Daniel Andrews, would have no differences whatsoever with the Baillieu and Gillard governments' anti-public education agenda. Under the previous Victorian Labor government, in office between 1999 and 2010, teachers endured one regressive, AEU-imposed agreement after another, leaving them among the lowest paid educators in the country and with the highest rate of insecure contract classrooms positions. To the extent that the union wants limited industrial action, it will only be to allow its membership to let off steam while the leadership steps up its efforts to reach a deal with the Baillieu government and implement its measures behind the backs of the rank-and-file.

The AEU is directly responsible for the current situation, in which every EBA negotiation becomes a mechanism not for improving teachers' wages and conditions, but for imposing further "productivity" concessions and other regressive measures.

Teachers need to take a stand. The 2012-2013 EBA dispute must become the launching point for a political counter-offensive—uniting teachers, parents, and the working class as a whole, throughout the country, in a struggle to defend public education and against the austerity agenda advanced by both the major parties, on behalf of finance capital. This requires a political fight against the Gillard government, as well as the state Liberal administration, which can only go forward to

the extent that teachers develop their own industrial and political campaign, in direct opposition to the AEU bureaucrats. Committees need to be formed in every school to coordinate the struggle and turn out to other layers of workers facing similar attacks on their jobs, wages, and conditions.

The defence of teachers and public education is, at the most fundamental level, a political struggle against the profit system itself. Every child should have the basic social right to a free, well-funded, and high quality public school that is geared towards developing their all-rounded intellectual, artistic, cultural, and social capacities. The resources already exist to ensure this right. But in Australia, as in the US, throughout Europe and the world, public education is being progressively dismantled as part of a wider social counter-revolution, aimed at eliminating all social spending and driving down the living standards of the working class. Genuine educational and social equality can be realised only through the working class taking up the struggle for a workers' government, the abolition of the profit system and the socialist reorganisation of society. This is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party.



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