

Australian Education Union uses mass meeting to prepare sell-out agreement

Susan Allan
15 February 2013

More than 30,000 teachers and education support staff in Victoria went on strike yesterday. The industrial action, the third state-wide stoppage in the last nine months, was organised by the Australian Education Union (AEU) as part of its efforts to reach a deal with the state Liberal government on a new enterprise bargaining agreement.

Yesterday's strike and mass meeting, held in central Melbourne and involving around 10,000 teachers and education workers, underscored the determination of the union bureaucracy to suppress any opposition to its behind-the-scenes preparations for a sell-out deal, which will undermine teachers' wages and conditions and facilitate further attacks on the public education system. The industrial action was specifically aimed at dragging out the campaign for a new EBA, wearing down teachers' determination to fight, and above all promoting the Labor Party, which is spearheading the pro-business, pro-privatisation drive against public education and public school teachers.

Since the last one-day strike and mass meeting, the AEU leadership, without consulting its membership, dropped the initial wage claim of 30 percent over three years down to just 12 percent. The state government of Premier Ted Baillieu simply ignored the offer, maintaining both his government's 2.5 percent annual wage ceiling for public sector workers, and a raft of other regressive proposals to divide schools and teachers, undermine permanency, increase hours and introduce pay for performance.

A definite unease about what is happening was evident among the thousands of teachers at yesterday's rally. Before the meeting, a teacher from a northern working class suburban school spoke with a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter about the AEU's dropping of the wage claim. "I'm not very happy with it at all," she explained. "I feel let down by the government and by the union. I feel like neither of them are listening to us. And so the union just dropped their claim and the government is now just bullying us. I think we need to get tough, to be honest."

Another teacher said: "It's ridiculous that they dropped the pay claim to effectively 4.2 percent per year. Inflation is

at 3 percent, so it's not really much of a pay rise. And it's not just about the pay. The facilities at all the schools are terrible. What is this campaign about, anyway? A bunch of people coming in dressed in red and saying they don't like what's happening? But the union isn't doing much else. It's different to what it used to be... I don't think education or transport or health should be about making a profit."

At the beginning of the meeting, Socialist Equality Party supporters foreshadowed an alternative resolution, in opposition to the AEU bureaucracy's proposal. The SEP resolution stressed the bipartisan nature of the assault on public education by state and federal governments, and made clear the necessity for teachers to take their struggle out of the hands of the AEU, establish rank and file action committees of teachers, students and parents, fighting for the defence of education on the basis of a socialist program. The resolution was read aloud to the meeting, and received vocal applause when it condemned and called for a boycott of the AEU-endorsed NAPLAN standardised testing regime introduced by Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

The bureaucracy was determined, however, to ram through its own resolution without any genuine debate. Above all, it was intent on denying SEP members and supporters the right to speak.

The AEU's proposal was to maintain the existing limited work bans in schools, and to begin a "wide ranging political campaign focusing on targeted [Liberal-National] coalition seats, including member and community activities which target coalition politicians." It was completely silent on the role of the federal Labor government, while being more explicit than ever before on the need to campaign for the Labor Party in the next state election, due in late 2014. Union state president Meredith Peace told the meeting that, if necessary, the "union campaign will continue right through to the next election." State Labor leader Daniel Andrews was promoted, and later addressed teachers outside parliament.

The union leadership received important backing 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 ensured that the very limited time allocated in the meeting for discussion was taken up with two bogus amendments to the AEU resolution.

One TESA member made clear to the meeting the outfit's aim, declaring "We have to improve and strengthen the leadership motion." The first amendment related to a section of the official resolution that called on the state government to bargain in "good faith" and make a "reasonable offer." The pseudo-lefts proposed to change this to, "reasonable offer on improvements in pay and working conditions such as class sizes, teaching time, contracts and protection of teachers in excess"—providing the union leadership with the cover of a bit of "left" rhetoric, while the sell-out preparations proceed. The AEU's record is clear. It is not negotiating for improved wages and conditions, but collaborating with the state and federal governments to implement their anti-public education agenda.

Unsurprisingly, the AEU gratefully accepted the pseudo-lefts' assistance and endorsed the amendment.

Long standing secondary teacher and well known Socialist Equality Party member Will Marshall stood at the front of the stadium, with his hand raised, calling to the chair to be permitted to speak in opposition to the proposed amendment. He was deliberately ignored. So blatant was the union's antidemocratic obstruction, that a teacher sitting towards the front of the hall, not associated with the SEP, called out to the chair that Marshall should be given the right to speak—"he is a member and has the right to speak like everyone else."

TESA's second amendment proposed a 48-hour strike during NAPLAN tests in May. This was aimed at blocking teachers from turning to other sections of the working class and taking up a political struggle against the Gillard and Baillieu governments. Instead, TESA suggested that a little more militant industrial action would secure teachers' interests. In order to press home this point, a member of Socialist Alternative repeated the position contained in a recent article by that organisation's Manolya Mustafa, which falsified the record of the nine day Chicago teachers' strike last year, claiming the defeat actually marked a "win" (see: "Australia's Socialist Alternative hails betrayal of Chicago teachers strike as a victory").

Outside the meeting, Mustafa berated SEP supporters, who were handing out copies of the party's resolution and of the WSWs reply to her article, demanding that they "f... off."

While the union rejected TESA's second amendment, approximately a quarter of the meeting voted in favour, reflecting bitter hostility among teachers towards the NAPLAN tests.

Only after this phony debate, and during discussion on another amendment proposing extended work banks, was Will Marshall finally permitted to speak, although he was continuously interrupted with a series of bogus points of order from the chair.

"The AEU and TESA are hiding the fact that behind Baillieu stands the Gillard government," Marshall told the meeting.

"That's the big unmentionable here. The Gillard government is beginning to impose the same austerity agenda as that being carried out in Greece and the US. The central components of the attack on education that Gillard has launched are NAPLAN and MySchool, and the AEU has worked with Gillard in establishing them. The results of these tests are used by Baillieu and the other state governments to blame teachers and shut schools.

"Teachers have to engage in a political and industrial struggle against those carrying out the assault on education—the Baillieu and Gillard governments. They have to take this struggle out of the hands of the AEU and turn to parents and other workers."

With the chair disallowing any further debate, the amendments were voted on and the amended AEU resolution then put to the meeting. Just as happened at last September's meeting, no-one was allowed to speak in opposition before the final vote was taken and the meeting closed. Unlike previous mass meetings, however, where the union's resolution received overwhelming support, this time a large layer of teachers abstained, indicating growing disquiet within the union's membership.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact