

Australia: Victorian teachers' union shuts down industrial campaign

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The Australian Education Union (AEU) in Victoria late last month shut down a year-long industrial campaign that has been waged by public school teachers. Behind the backs of ordinary teachers, the union is engaged in closed-door discussions with the state Liberal government to finalise a sell-out enterprise bargaining agreement.

Details of the new agreement are yet to be released. The union leadership, however, has already arbitrarily jettisoned a wage claim for a 10 percent annual increase over three years. Last November it dropped the figure to just 4 percent, a proposal that would leave Victorian teachers among the lowest paid in the country. The final wage outcome is likely to be even less, with the government previously insisting that it would not compromise on its 2.5 percent public sector wage ceiling, with any additional increase dependent on equivalent cost-cutting “productivity” offsets.

Late last year an internal union leak also revealed that the bureaucracy was negotiating new measures allowing so-called excess teachers to be sacked. 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 government has similarly given no indication that it is prepared to make any concessions on the other issues confronting teachers in the latest enterprise bargaining agreement, including class sizes and contract teaching. Almost one in five of all teachers, and half of new teachers, are currently on short-term, insecure contracts. Over the last two decades, the AEU

has imposed one regressive industrial agreement after another on Victorian teachers that have facilitated rising class sizes and expanding exploitation of contract labour in schools.

The union has now shut down the industrial campaign, contemptuously ignoring its own resolution approved at the last mass meeting in February, attended by more than 10,000 teachers, which called for continued action. From the beginning of the campaign, the union sought to isolate teachers from other sections of the working class confronting similar attacks on their working conditions and wages. Three one-day strikes and mass meetings were called to let off steam. At the same time, a drawn-out and limited series of work bans were imposed in the schools, designed not to pressure the government but to wear down opposition among teachers.

The union finally shut down the campaign by seizing on the pretext of the state government’s announcement that it would no longer seek to have so-called performance pay incorporated into the new agreement. This will no doubt be promoted by the AEU as proof of a “victory” when the final agreement is unveiled.

The union’s position on performance pay is an utter fraud. In the first instance, Victorian premier Dennis Napthine has openly declared that the measure will still be pursued, albeit via different mechanisms. “The government strongly supports performance pay,” Napthine declared, “and we want to continue the discussions on performance pay in consultation with parents, teachers, school principals, unions and the wider school community and all stakeholders.”

Throughout the industrial dispute, the Liberal government has issued several policy papers making clear its determination to press ahead with its pro-business education “reform” agenda. This has included

a proposal 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 into schools.

The AEU is responsible for implementing the mechanisms through which performance pay will be extended throughout the school system, namely the NAPLAN standardised testing regime. Working hand-in-hand with the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard, the union is the critical enforcer of the bipartisan assault on the public education system. It has also actively campaigned on behalf of the government to promote the new funding model unveiled by Gillard this week that entrenches the flow the large sums of public funds to wealthy private schools and is designed to encourage the further drift of students from the public to the private sectors. (See “Australian government guts university funding, promotes private schools”)

The AEU’s primary objective throughout the Victorian teachers’ dispute has been to prevent the emergence of a political challenge against the Gillard government.

Teachers can only defend their independent interests—for adequate wages, employment security, class sizes, and for a properly resourced public school system—by taking up a struggle against both the Gillard and Napthine governments. This requires teachers taking their fight out of the hands of the AEU, forming new rank-and-file action committees of teachers, education workers, students and parents in every school and neighbourhood, and turning out to other sections of the working class. The defence of public education, in Australia as internationally, requires the struggle for a workers’ government and the implementation of socialist policies.

The immediate task is to prevent the AEU ramming through yet another sell out agreement. The last enterprise deal, imposed in 2008, was presented as a fait accompli to teachers. No mass meeting was held to discuss the deal, details of which were suppressed by the union bureaucracy for as long as possible, while a series of tightly controlled union delegates’ meetings were convened to ram through a token vote of approval, before ordinary teachers understood exactly what had been agreed to. Teachers must now demand the

immediate release of the agreement between the AEU and the state government, and a mass meeting where teachers can engage in the fullest democratic discussion, which will expose the devastating implications of the deal for teachers' rights and conditions, and for the future of public education as a whole.



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