

Australia: Tasmanian teachers take strike action

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Tasmanian teachers took strike action on April 2 and 3, following stoppages in November. The strike reflected pent-up anger over the stagnant wages and destruction of conditions imposed by successive Labor and Liberal state governments.

Tasmanian teachers are the lowest paid of any state in Australia, due to pay rises being pegged at 2 percent per annum for all public sector workers. In reality a pay cut, this measure was introduced by the Labor/Greens government in 2011 and has been enforced by the trade unions ever since.

Even though teachers overwhelmingly voted for strike action across Tasmania, the Australian Education Union (AEU) set out to divide teachers from the outset. Half day stoppages were staggered across the state.

About 1,000 teachers in north-west Tasmania walked out on half day stoppages on April 2 and attended a packed stop work meeting in Burnie. Teachers in Launceston and the state capital Hobart struck separately the next day and attended similarly large meetings. In all, the union represents 5,600 teachers across the state.

Tasmanian teachers are part of a strike wave of educators is taking place across five continents. In the US, teachers in West Virginia went on strike at the beginning of 2018 and stoppages have spread across the country since then. The AEU and the media have ensured that Australian teachers know nothing about these developments.

In Tasmania, public sector unions deliberately kept workers divided. They failed to call strikes of their own workers, leaving the teachers to strike alone. However, bureaucrats from other unions spoke at all three meetings of teachers in order to give a semblance of a unified campaign.

Nick Clifford from East Derwent primary school

spoke at the Hobart meeting and described the problems facing children that he routinely encounters in his class. As he mentioned children on the autism spectrum, in psychological care, experiencing family break down or violence, he received increasing loud applause.

Clearly the audience faced similar problems with very limited or no assistance at all. The meeting erupted when Clifford said he had to draw up lengthy individual learning plans; and when he said that if teachers called in sick and no replacement teacher was available, the class was split and divided into other already overflowing grades.

One teacher on the AEU Facebook page commented that her “biggest concern” was “performance-based pay.” Another referred to the government taking “away public holidays.”

The strike went ahead after the AEU rejected the Liberal government’s updated offer of 2 percent in the first year of the agreement and then 2.5 percent for the next two years. According to the AEU this is a 0.25 percent improvement from the government’s previous offer. The AEU’s counterclaim was barely greater than that of the government, at 2 percent in the first year and 3 percent for the following two years.

Both pay deals, which fail to keep up with inflation, were an insult to teachers.

The union was desperate to call off the strikes. AEU Tasmania state manager Roz Madsen said that “industrial action is always an absolute last resort for educators and the AEU’s elected teacher and support staff leadership would consider calling off industrial action if the crucial combination of workload and pay were addressed.”

The AEU leaders function as the industrial police for the government, seeking at every point to contain the

anger of teachers, minimize industrial action and impose an agreement that meets the government's budgetary requirements.

At a meeting held on 29 March, the Liberal government provocatively issued demands for offsets that threatened job cuts and the imposition of salaries based on performance pay. The government demands ensured the strike went ahead, even though the union had bent over backwards to try to prevent it happening.

"This all shows that [Liberal Premier] Will Hodgman was never serious about negotiations and is hell bent on closing schools and putting political game playing ahead of the best interests of students and teachers," Helen Richardson, AEU Tasmania president complained.

Australian Council of Trade Unions secretary Sally McManus was the key note speaker at the Hobart mass meeting. Her presence underlined that the commitment of the AEU to the ACTU's bogus Change the Rules campaign. This aims to return a federal Labor government and to change Fair Work Australia legislation to enhance the position of the union bureaucracy. The unions backed these oppressive laws, which ban virtually all strike activity, when they were legislated by a Labor government in 2009.

McManus demagogically declared: "I see a room full of leaders. When historians look back they try to pinpoint the times when things are changing. They wonder could you have foreseen when change was coming... Your fight for justice and for a pay rise is not happening in isolation...."

McManus told them they had suffered 30 years of trickle-down economics. To huge applause, she declared: "We've had enough of inequality, we've had enough of being told we can't have pay rises when the rich aren't paying their fair share of tax."

What a fraud. The Hawke and Keating governments from 1983 to 1996 were responsible for imposing the pro-market policies that were implemented in Britain by Thatcher and in the US by Reagan and resulted in the biggest redistribution of wealth in history to the richest strata of society.

The ACTU and all of the unions were instrumental in suppressing the opposition of workers to this retrograde agenda and have worked with governments—Liberal and Labor ever since to undermine the living standards of the working class. Federal Labor leader Bill Shorten

has hailed the legacy of Hawke and Keating, and, if he wins office, will carry out the dictates of big business.

Teachers in Tasmania, who want to fight for better pay and conditions, firstly have to recognize that is impossible within the straitjacket of the trade unions and begin to form their own democratically-elected, rank-and-file committees. These committees need to turn to other sections of workers in Tasmania, other states and internationally who face a similar crisis.

This must be guided by a fundamentally different political perspective—the fight for a workers' government to implement socialist policies, including free high quality education for all and decent pay and conditions for teachers.



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