

Teachers strike in South Australia and Tasmania

By Oscar Grenfell
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Thousands of teachers in the Australian states of Tasmania and South Australia took part in strike action late last month. The stoppages were the latest expression of growing opposition to a pro-business assault on the sector spearheaded over the past decade by Labor governments and enforced by the unions.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) organised the industrial action amid ongoing disputes over separate enterprise agreements (EAs) covering teachers in both states. The union has done everything it can to prevent a unified struggle of teachers against the assault on public education.

At the same time, the AEU sought to divert anger behind the fraudulent claim the election of state Labor governments would halt cuts being imposed by the Liberals.

Teachers in South Australia walked off the job on the morning of November 29, forcing the closure of almost 200 schools. Around 3,000 teachers rallied in the city centre of Adelaide, the state's capital, in front of the Education Department headquarters.

They expressed anger over worsening working conditions and cuts to educational resources.

Adrian Mann, a teacher at Salisbury High School, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: "There's been a lot talked about resourcing by those in government but much of it seems to be about infrastructure and it's all about what affects students in the classroom. First and foremost, it's about students and a just outcome for the kids—supporting those that need the most support."

Teresa Tsouvalas, a contract teacher, said she was rallying to demand expanded job permanency. "It just makes our future a lot more unsure and we really need teachers that are enthusiastic to stay around and actually have a permanent job and a future in our

schooling system," she said.

In negotiations for a new agreement, the AEU has postured as an opponent of the government's refusal to expand funding for staff who assist students with learning difficulties. It has made vague calls for a reduction in the growing use of casuals and for greater incentives for teachers to work in rural and regional areas.

The union is calling for a 3.5 percent per annum pay rise. Coming after previous agreements that have mandated wage rises that barely kept pace with the official rate of inflation, the increase would do nothing to resolve the growing financial pressures on teachers amid a rising cost of living.

Moreover, the conditions already facing teachers are an indictment of the union. The November 29 stoppage was the first involving teachers in the state in over a decade. During a period of growing classroom sizes, expanding casualisation and other attacks on teachers' rights, the unions have done everything they can to suppress opposition from educators.

The AEU collaborated closely with the Labor government of Premier Jay Weatherill from 2011 until it was thrown out of office last March.

During his unsuccessful bid for re-election earlier this year, Weatherill boasted that his government had destroyed 250 permanent positions at the education department over seven years, as part of a broader onslaught on public sector jobs. He claimed that his government had created an additional 800 teaching positions—but the overwhelming majority of these were casual and contract.

AEU officials have already signalled that they are willing to impose a sell-out deal.

On November 27, AEU South Australian Secretary Howard Spreadbury told "Nine News" that industrial

action disrupting children's learning was a "significant concern" to teachers. He bemoaned the fact that the government had not approached the union for talks aimed at forging a "last minute deal" to prevent the stoppage.

Immediately after the strike, AEU bureaucrats entered into closed-room discussions with government representatives who had just been denouncing teachers in comments to the media.

The union has sought to isolate teachers, by presenting the dispute as exclusively state-based. Its role is graphically demonstrated by the fact that it has opposed any moves to unify the concurrent struggles of teachers in South Australia and Tasmania.

Tasmanian teachers took part in stop-work meetings on November 26 and 27, as part of an ongoing conflict over pay rates in a new enterprise agreement. Over 150 schools were affected by the stoppage, which followed partial strikes in October.

The dispute is over the state Liberal government's insistence that any pay rises in public sector agreements will be capped at 2 percent per annum. The public sector unions, and the AEU, have sought to keep the conflict narrowly focused, suppressing any broader discussion of the gutting of education funding, and worsening working conditions.

They have actively promoted the Labor Party, including by inviting Labor's Tasmanian leader, Rebecca White, to a protest in Hobart in October.

The union campaign is a monumental fraud. It was the state's former Labor-Greens coalition government, which in 2011 introduced a 2 percent wage ceiling for all public sector workers. Over the following years, the unions signed enterprise agreements mandating pay increases below the rate of inflation.

This was part of a broader austerity agenda in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and an economic slowdown in the state. The Labor-Greens government, with the full support of the unions, sought to axe over 1,000 public sector jobs and attempted to shut down more than 20 schools.

Since the ouster of the Labor government in 2014, the public sector unions, including the AEU, have done nothing to oppose ongoing attacks by the Liberal government.

These have included the destruction of 400 federal public sector jobs in the state, or around 10 percent of

the total, and ongoing wage cuts across the public and private sectors. As a result, the average full-time weekly wage is \$212.30 lower than on the mainland. Nurses, teachers and other public servants are paid around 11 percent less than their colleagues in some other states.

Like their counterparts in South Australia, AEU officials in Tasmania are seeking to impose further cuts. After the stop-work last week, they resumed discussions with the government for a sell-out.

On Thursday, the union's negotiating team posted a video to Facebook, declaring that "all the hard work has paid off" and a "much improved offer" had been presented that "addressed a lot of workload issues." They were compelled to note that the government was sticking to its two percent cap.

The role of the unions at the state level is in line with their support for the "education revolution" by the federal Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, in office from 2007–2013.

The education unions facilitated the introduction of NAPLAN standardised testing, leagues tables ranking schools on "student performance" and other regressive measures. These have been the spearhead of a pro-business education agenda, enforced by state and federal governments ever since, aimed at slashing funding and subordinating the sector ever more directly to the dictates of the corporate elite.

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