

History Lesson: Teachers and free speech

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The significance of the “Beatrice Taylor affair” can’t be overstated, not only for the future of Federation but also the concept of mass mobilisation, Federation leaderships’ later tactics, political affiliation freedoms for citizens, and the Communist abolition referendum and battle for control of the union in the 1950s.

Beatrice Taylor was an eloquent and powerfully persuasive speaker. Her Federation membership commenced at the union’s foundation and she was elected Vice President in 1921.

She was a highly respected teacher and passionate orator, advocating indefatigably on behalf of colleagues when their jobs were threatened as married women, moving the motion against their dismissal by Government fiat.

Along with Sam Lewis, later to be President of Federation, she founded the Education Workers’ League. A Friends of the Soviet Union delegation left Australia for the USSR in March 1932 with one teacher Beatrice Taylor, who was sponsored by the league.



She arrived back in September and began writing and speaking about what she had seen. *The Educational Worker* published three of her articles and she gave 77 lectures, including 13 in Victoria.

On 14 November, 1932, she gave a lecture in the Methodist hall in Manly. The meeting began with the national anthem and the speakers table was covered with the Union Jack and chaired by the Methodist minister.

Three days later she received a formal letter from the Director General of Education asking questions about the advertisement for this lecture. “Was she the Miss Taylor referred too? Was she correctly described as a delegate of the NSW Educational Workers’ League to the Soviet Union?”

On 9 December, she made a written reply declining to answer these questions because they concerned her private actions and infringed upon her rights as a citizen.

On the 23rd, she was informed by the Director she was suspended from duty and had been charged under the Public Service Act for misconduct, wilful disobedience to a lawful order and improper conduct. She denied the charges and a Public Service Board inquiry was set for 24 January the next year.

As soon as she was suspended a Beatrice Taylor Defence Committee was established with Sam Lewis as Secretary. It immediately issued a circular explaining the case and invited organisations to be represented at a protest conference.

It gained plenty of attention from the press and the public. The meeting was an overwhelming success: more than 500 delegates attended, representing 278 organisations including 50 trade unions and 111 Labor party

branches (but not the Executive of the Labor party!).

The theme of the conference was civil liberties but what hit the headlines was the actions by parents in support of Ms Taylor to keep students away from the first day of school.

It was estimated that more than half of students were kept at home by their parents on the day. At the same time, a demonstration outside her school attracted several hundred protesters, who were confronted by 30 uniformed and 20 plain clothes policemen.

The Public Service Board hearing was postponed until 31 January, which provided the Defence Committee with another opportunity to organise a mass protest meeting, this time at Sydney Town Hall. The meeting started with Beatrice Taylor talking on the Soviet Union.

After all the media and protests the actual hearing was somewhat of an anti-climax. Ms Taylor was represented by leading Labor barrister Clive Evatt, later to be a prominent parliamentarian.

Evatt asserted in his opening remarks that a public servant was under no obligation to obey an order that did not relate to his or her employment or the capacity in which he or she was employed. The board adjourned. After the adjournment it upheld the point and all charges failed. Ms Taylor was not required to give evidence and was reinstated immediately.

However, education minister David Drummond (Country Party), who had clearly instigated the charges via the Director General and the Board was not content to let the matter rest.

Although he claimed to be a supporter of liberty against authority, he was a rabid anti-communist. One of his acts as minister was to attempt to remove from the Department all teachers who were members of the Communist Party or affiliated groups, such as the Labor party's "Socialisation units".

After Ms Taylor's reinstatement, Drummond tried to have stronger action taken against her; he made numerous public statements against her but state cabinet refused to act.

The "Beatrice Taylor affair" clearly established a teacher's right to involve themselves in the political debate of the wider community.

John Dixon, General Secretary