

Australia: Teachers denounce privatisation of migrant language courses

Richard Phillips
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Adult Migrant English Service (AMES) teachers demonstrated in Sydney last week over the privatisation of English language courses and the destruction of 500 teachers' jobs. They picketed AMES offices, now being occupied by the Australian Centre for Languages (ACL), a private contractor.

The teachers confront a bipartisan political assault. While the federal Howard government is completing the privatisation of AMES, the Keating Labor government began the process. In 1992, the Laborites cut English language tuition hours for migrants from 900 to 510 hours, slashed funding and forced AMES to tender for work in competition against private companies.

Since 1996, the Howard government has expanded the tendering process and cut \$67 million from AMES. In December 1997, the Liberals, confident in the knowledge that they faced no real opposition from the teachers' unions, announced that AMES had lost most of the tendering to ACL.

Where once AMES assisted over 20,000 migrants per year in New South Wales, today ACL controls services in Sydney's west, southwest, and south, and in Wollongong--two thirds of all courses in the state. Its staff are employed on a casual or temporary basis, work longer hours, have five weeks fewer holidays per annum and receive \$4,000 less per annum than AMES teachers.

These conditions establish a new benchmark to be used against teachers in the public schools. Moreover, a precedent has been established for privatisation of wider areas of the education system. Already the Howard government is using its States Grants legislation to transfer millions of dollars from public to private schools.

The privatisation of AMES will no doubt mean a

severe diminution in the quality of courses for refugees and newly arrived migrants. This is part of an overall attack on the rights of migrant workers and their families. The Liberals have cut immigration numbers, especially the family reunion program, introduced new measures to favour English-speaking and business immigrants, and stripped migrants of welfare benefits for the first two years after their arrival.

The state Labor government has lined up with the Liberals by refusing to challenge the AMES privatisation and the NSW Teachers Federation has refused to call state-wide industrial action. Last year the union signed a no-strike agreement with the Labor government. As a result, 500 dedicated English language teachers have been pushed into redundancy or are being shunted around the education system.

Peter Reynolds, one of the 75 teachers formerly employed at the Parramatta AMES, in Sydney's western suburbs, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: 'I am displaced, on salary maintenance and awaiting redeployment to a school where I will be a square peg in a round hole. This is economic rationalism, where private is best, and the best is the cheapest. This is a fallacy.

'The government is not just attacking migrants but attacking anyone that can't fight--migrants, youth, elderly and the unemployed. It's all part of an attempt to convert us into a 20/80 society--20 percent will be the haves and 80 percent the have-nots.

'I think we have been badly let down by the Carr Labor government. They have done absolutely nothing to help. They have failed to take the steps that could be taken to prevent this. They even refused to lodge an appeal.'

Lloyd Norris, a teacher with 18 years service in the southwest division, said AMES teachers were dedicated

and had been successful in fighting for improved courses for migrants. 'For me this has been a great job because what you do, in some way does redress the balance for migrants.

'Labor claimed tendering would provide a better economic outcome, but the bottom line was, and, as we see today, is the dollar. There is concern for social equality and justice and for economic rationalism to be given the big boot. The problem we confront though is a situation where both parties have a similar economic platform.'

Gloria Alvarez said: 'The government has set a precedent in their effort to privatise education as a whole. This is bad for teachers and even more devastating for migrants.

'To teach English as a second language migrants need longer hours and as much attention as possible. AMES caters to students who are illiterate, even in their native tongue. Private enterprise is not interested in that--they don't want decent programs. Their main concern is not quality education, but the biggest profits.'

Winston Brass, who migrated from India in 1972, said: 'The rot started when the Labor government restricted teaching hours to 510 hours per student. This meant that all you could do was to prepare students as factory fodder for unskilled jobs.'

Commenting on the NSW Teachers Federation, Brass said: 'When Labor introduced tendering, the federation was silent; they said and did nothing about it. We are one of the biggest public sector unions and yet these resources have not been used.

'I've basically given up going to federation meetings, it is a complete waste of time. The federation conference was held a few weeks ago but they have sold us out. They are not doing anything to defeat the government on this.

'The Federation leadership sits there getting thousands of dollars and perks. We are just a minor irritation to them--like fleas on the tail of the dog. I've no regard for this kind of dishonesty.'

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