

Faction fight in New Zealand teachers union

A New Zealand correspondent
28 August 1998

As the National government in New Zealand prepares a fresh round of attacks on the public education system, the trade union covering secondary teachers is in embroiled in a squalid factional dispute within its top leadership.

The Post Primary Teachers Association current president Martin Cooney has filed legal action against the union following the release of documents containing allegations about his personal behaviour and the degeneration of working relationships inside the union's national office.

A group of 11 past members of the national executive, including two former presidents, circulated the documents among union members. Complaints refer to Cooney's alleged intimidating behaviour towards union staff and public drunkenness, including a late night drinking session with the National government's Minister of Education, Wyatt Creech.

The PPTA national executive has instructed Cooney to take leave from his position. According to the union's newspaper *PPTA News*, Cooney has taken legal action, claiming the allegations will wreck any parliamentary career after he finishes as union president at the end of the year.

The faction fight, which has erupted in the midst of union elections, has received considerable attention in the national media. The PPTA is one of the few remaining unions with a significant membership level, covering over 90 percent of secondary teachers, and with a national collective employment contract. According to the press, the divisions represent a move by union moderates to oust the current 'militant' leadership.

But neither side in this unprincipled power struggle have expressed any fundamental disagreements over policy or political program. They share a common history and a common responsibility for the deterioration of public education under Labor and

National Party governments over the last 14 years.

Cooney is part of a layer which has dominated the union since the early 1980s, with close links to the Labour Party. He was groomed for the job by two former presidents who are now among those circulating the material against him.

After Cooney became president, the pay and conditions of teachers deteriorated markedly as the union pursued a so-called Modernisation Program in co-operation with the National Party government during 1991-93.

By 1996, the real pay of teachers had declined to pre-1984 levels and workload and stress had increased markedly, provoking opposition among union members. At the 1995 PPTA national conference, delegates overturned an executive recommendation for a 15 percent pay increase and demanded 21 percent instead.

Cooney and other leaders denounced the move as 'adventurism,' then worked to undermine the conference decision, and claimed the settlement of 12 percent reached in 1996 was a significant victory. In fact, the new contract included performance criteria which are now the basis for imposing increased workloads and management controls on teachers.

The government also tried to push ahead with 'bulk funding,' which hands over control of funding in all matters including staffing to individual schools, thereby undermining the national system of public education. The plan is similar to the 'global resourcing' of schools in Australia and the 'opting out' system in Britain. It will result in funding cuts and a further widening of divisions between rich and poor schools.

The union leadership nominally opposes 'bulk funding' but has carried out no serious national campaign against the policy. Individual schools have been left to their own devices. It is a measure of the opposition to the plan that for a number of years only

about 10 percent of schools had opted for 'bulk funding'.

However, in this year's budget, the government has provided another \$220 million to make the 'bulk funding' more attractive for individual school boards. Despite the continuing attacks on public education, the teachers union has taken no action to oppose the plan.

The government has begun a school closure program. Two schools in Invercargill are due to close by the end of the year and be replaced by one. Petone College, a working class school near Wellington, is also likely to be closed later this year in spite of widespread opposition, including large public meetings and a protest march on parliament by teachers and students.

More money is going to private education. The Education Review Office recently proposed the privatisation of the Correspondence School, New Zealand's only distance education institution for primary and secondary students. The school has a staff of some 200 teachers, who provide correspondence courses for rural students and also for those with special needs who cannot be accommodated in normal schools.

Funding for the Special Education Service, which provides specialist teaching for students with emotional, behavioural and intellectual problems, has been changed resulting in the loss of 50 jobs later this year.

For nearly two decades, all factions of the PPTA leadership have presided over this mounting crisis in public education, collaborating closely with both Labour and National Party ministers. Once the union elections are over and the dust has settled in the faction fight, the policies of the PPTA leadership will be exactly the same.

See Also:

An unstable minority government in New Zealand
[20 August 1998]



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact