

School students strike against New Zealand funding scheme

A correspondent
25 September 1998

Six hundred students at Mountainview High School in Timaru, a rural centre in the South Island of New Zealand, went on strike earlier this month against the school's board of trustees' decision to opt for the National Party government's 'bulk funding' scheme.

The strike, which was supported by most of the student body, was organised by the two head students, Rosie Harris and Craig Edlin, out of concern for 'the future of the school'. They said that the protest was 'student driven,' although students were showing support for their teachers, who had also opposed the decision.

In a letter to parents, the two students said: 'It is the teachers who have made our school what it is today and we are really concerned about what this decision is going to do in the future.' The letter asked parents to support the protest by not sending their children to school on the day of the student strike.

A mass meeting of parents held a week after the strike criticised the board for failing to consult the community and called for the decision to opt for bulk funding to be put on hold. The call was rejected by the board chairperson, saying that the decision was a 'done deal' and would not be reversed. The national president of the School Trustees Association, Owen Edgerton, supported the board decision, declaring that teachers who 'attempt to undermine a board's decision' should 'butt out'.

Bulk funding is a scheme introduced by the National Party government in 1992. It was initially foreshadowed in the Picot Report, brought down by the previous Labour government to lay the basis for 'self-managing' schools.

Bulk funding removes the administration of school funding from the hands of government and turns it over to the individual elected school boards. It is central to

the drive to break up the national education system, slash education funding and widen the gap between rich and poor schools. Under the scheme, schools are forced increasingly to turn to parent contributions, sponsorship and deals with private companies in order to survive.

Schools in wealthier areas are able to attract far greater funds and resources than poorer schools. For example, Wellington College, a wealthy school in the country's capital, has very significant financial backing from its past pupils' network, as well as a school auditorium sponsored by the large corporation, Brierley International. It is able to charge \$400 per year in parental contributions, and gathers over 80 percent of its funding target from this source. In contrast, schools in working class areas attract no sponsorship and cannot charge or collect contributions from parents.

By including teachers' salaries in the scheme, bulk funding leads to the replacement of a national collective employment contract with site and individual contracts. With staffing budgets funded according to a particular figure on the salary scale, there is a strong incentive for schools to continually replace older, experienced staff with younger, less experienced and therefore cheaper teachers.

Widespread opposition to the scheme has limited the number of schools involved to about 10 percent of the total. However, in the last budget the government set aside a pool of \$220 million to bribe more schools to choose bulk funding. As a result, the proportion of schools has risen to over 20 percent. The Ministry of Education told Mountainview High that it stands to gain up to \$240,000 over the next three years by taking up the bulk funding 'option'.

The stand taken by the students at Mountainview is in marked contrast to the position adopted by the teachers' union, the Post Primary Teachers' Association. The

PPTA nationally has organised no campaign of industrial or political action to stop the government's bulk funding scheme. Individual union branches have been left to decide on a school-by-school basis how to respond to the funding plan.

Although the Mountainview staff opposed their own board's decision, no strike took place to support the students' action. The school was closed for half a day while the staff met to 'consider the decision'. The school's PPTA branch chairman, Denis Veal, said the teachers were 'humbled by the support the students showed'. But the staff resolved to 'work to rule' and to charge the board \$35 per hour for extra duties undertaken before and after normal school hours.

The regional PPTA chairman, John Bell, issued a statement calling on the school board to resign, but organised no action in neighbouring schools. He went on to applaud recent statements from Labour Party spokesmen indicating that a future Labour government would rescind the bulk funding scheme and give schools that had opted for it one year to return to a central funding mechanism.

Any reliance on the Labour Party to do away with bulk funding is completely misplaced. The National Party is simply putting in place a policy which flows from the measures introduced by the Labour governments during the 1980s. Like the National Party, Labour is driven by the demands of big business for financial incentives, lower corporate taxes and therefore less spending on essential services such as public education and health.



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