

Australia:

Teachers and parents oppose "Self Governing Schools"

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26 June 1999

Supported by parents, teachers began strike action on June 6 at Blackburn High School, in the Australian state of Victoria, after the school council voted to become part of the state Liberal government's "Self Governing Schools" (SGS) program.

Forty of the 62 teachers, along with 10 parents, set up a picket line at the main entrance to the school. The strike ended on June 16, however, without the teachers winning their demand for proper consultation with the school community over the direction of the school's policy. The school council has signed a contract under the Education Services Act to make the school self governing.

The SGS program involves running government schools as businesses. School councils assume the role of directing and running schools, with the right to hire and fire teachers. They will enter closer partnerships with various industries and commercial interests.

The Kennett government is pressuring schools into the program by starving them of funds. Victorian schools receive \$193 less per student than the national average. As a result, problems with literacy and truancy are worsening. By one estimate, given by the head of a federal program dealing with truancy, almost 20 percent of students in the state's poorest areas are skipping class.

Every school faces a situation where a decline in enrolments sees a corresponding cut in funding and therefore the programs it offers. The state government's incentive and at the same time, ultimatum, for schools to enter the SGS program is that they can specialise in particular areas such as sport, music, science, arts or languages. Schools accredited as "Specialist Schools" will receive an additional \$150,000 over three years,

and be assisted by the government-backed Education Trust, which will act as a broker in securing sponsorship deals.

Blackburn High School is renowned for its music programs. School councillors who support the move to becoming a Self Governing School claim that it would allow more funding for music. With more sponsorship, the school would also be able to lower the "levies" that parents have to pay for their children to enrol in particular subjects.

In September 1998, the Blackburn High School council initially opposed the school becoming part of the SGS program. According to the teachers' trade union, the Australian Education Union, the council reversed its stand after the principal warned that the Education Department would withdraw its support of the school's music program. The council's president told the local media that only self-governing status could "guarantee the future survival of the school".

Parents were sent a school newsletter which outlined some of the features of SGS, but according to Peter Fagg, a parent and school councillor, no school meetings were held over the about-face. When parents took up a petition, over 300 signed within one day, calling for more consultation. Fagg told the *World Socialist Web Site* that at least 80 percent of parents felt the same way. A student petition quickly gained 250 signatories out of a student population of 950.

Having applied financial blackmail to the school council, Education Minister Phil Gude cynically accused striking teachers of setting themselves against democratically-elected school councils. "They don't want mums and dads to have a greater say in the running of their children's school," he claimed.

When a meeting of Blackburn High parents and students was organised on June 15, however, about 300 parents attended and the overwhelming majority voted for a delay to allow proper discussion. Two hundred or so parents then went to the school council meeting to demand a re-election of the councillors. Despite this, the school council has refused to back down.

The union branch president at Blackburn High School, John Doyle, told *WSWS* that the lack of consultation "was the final trigger" for the strike. The self-governing model would have an increasingly adverse impact over the next five years. In a letter to the *Age* newspaper he wrote, "Self governance is a form of 'corporatisation' that will divert the school from its core function of educating children as it focuses more on its business and marketing needs... Students benefit from the loyalty and sense of connection that teachers develop in a stable staffing environment. The financial viability of the self-governing school, however will depend upon the employment of lower-paid, short-term contract teachers".

SGS is the end product of a long process. A turning point came with the introduction of "Schools of the Future" in 1993. The Kennett government gave principals more power in the selection of teachers, and employed all new teachers on short-term contracts, paying them up to \$10,000 less annually than permanent staff.

The then education minister, Don Hayward, who co-authored a book, *The Future of Schools*, stated the government's aims clearly. He wrote of private schools: "We already had models of highly successful schools, which were attended by more than 30 percent of Victoria's school students. What we needed to do was make all our schools 'independent'. We needed to dismantle the system".

The "dismantling" of the public school system was further advanced in 1996 when the government announced that all schools would be termed "Designated Schools" and could contract out many of the services that were formerly paid for by the government. Schools could provide "personnel services" for other schools, so that bigger schools could send specialist teachers to other schools and gain financially.

Finally, with Self Governing Schools, schools have a different relationship to the government and with each

other. They effectively opt out of the state school system. By borrowing funds, raising parental fees, hiring out their teachers to other schools, and buying and selling school premises, wealthier bigger schools will seek to expand at the expense of their poorer counterparts, leading to more closures and further rationalisation.

The significance of the struggle at Blackburn High School is that it foreshadows a wider opposition to the creeping privatisation of state education. It is the first time in two decades that teachers have taken week-long strike action.

Teachers at Sandringham Secondary College have also begun industrial action to oppose the decision taken by their school council. The teachers passed a vote of no confidence in the council and planned a series of short stoppages for this week.

In response to these developments, the Australian Education Union has been quick to announce its opposition to SGS. However, it has known of the SGS plan since the start of 1997. The union also endorsed the establishment of the Business Advisory Council, representing some of the biggest businesses in Australia, which oversaw the working parties that shaped the SGS program.

The union has left individual schools to fight on their own, as it did when the Kennett government shut more than 400 schools from 1993 onwards. The AEU isolated teachers and parents who undertook school occupations and community actions, wearing down every struggle and enabling the government to continue its attack on state education.



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