

Australian rural town acts to defend education facilities

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The residents of the Upper Hunter Valley town of Merriwa, some 300 kilometres north-west of Sydney, turned out to prevent the removal of a portable classroom from the local school last month. Under the direction of officials from the state Department of Education, a group of contractors with a crane arrived at Merriwa Central School to do the job. What happened next took the Department and the New South Wales state Labor Party government entirely by surprise.

Out of a population of barely 1,500, well over 300 residents rallied to block the removal. Housewives, teachers, children, farmers, rural workers, local businessmen and even members of the clergy rushed to the school from all points. The local Anglican and Catholic churches had tolled their bells to warn that the cranes and trucks were arriving.

So determined was the resistance that extra police officers had to be dispatched from the larger nearby town of Muswellbrook to break through and remove the human cordon formed by the protesters across the school gate and around the demountable classroom. People, young and old, had to be dragged away by the police. Two protestors were locked in police vans, although they were later released without being charged.

The classroom was eventually removed but, alarmed by the resistance, the state government later agreed to replace the demountable with one that has been refurbished by prisoners at the Cessnock jail. The Education Department has also begun work on some of the many overdue repairs needed at the school, including 10-year-old earthquake damage to the school's science building.

The saga began some months earlier when the Department of Education's Assistant Director General Steve Buckley said the demountable was urgently required at Lake Illawarra High School, south of Sydney, to replace a fire-damaged building.

Despite several approaches to the Department and numerous letters to ministers, Opposition shadow ministers and government officials, explaining that the removal of the classroom would seriously undermine the quality of education at the school, the pleas of residents were ignored. One official, Robert Lewis, a District Education Superintendent from Tamworth, went as far as to threaten the residents. "If you do not stop making a fuss, then a lot more could be taken from the

town," he declared.

Residents said six demountables had been removed from the school in as many years, and the latest action was "the straw that broke the camel's back". They pointed out that the loss of this classroom would force Year 11 and 12 history and economics students to take their lessons in woodwork rooms and science labs.

Verina Rallings, the secretary of the town's Parents and Citizens Committee, a casual teacher and a pivotal figure in organising the protest, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "We have lost demountables in the past and we have been able to work around that. This time it was not possible to do that and provide appropriate learning classes for the children. The department was telling us otherwise. We have 250 students at the school of primary and high school ages and the removal of this classroom would have meant cutting courses for the children."

Speaking of the many appeals made to government and Department officials, Rallings said: "The thing is, they were just not listening to us. We had to fight and lobby to make them listen. They needed a building and we were a small target. They did not count on the response they got. We have already lost so much. It was something else they were going to take away. But this time they had to turn up physically to do it. That gave us the best opportunity so far to fight back. Not only were they removing a classroom, but the school also had outstanding repairs stretching back to the Newcastle earthquake in 1989.

"Many schools like ours have demountable classrooms that had been there for many years. As this type of buildings is so widely used, why hasn't the government budgeted to maintain them? If they are supposed to be emergency classrooms, how is it possible for the department not to have any on hand when there is an emergency?"

The widespread use of demountables in schools across the state allows the government to avoid spending on permanent buildings and maintenance. The temporary buildings are too cold in winter and too hot in summer, making them inadequate to meet teaching and learning needs. But because of the lack of alternative facilities, they have become essential if schools are to maintain learning programs.

Merriwa is 176 km north-east of Newcastle, a major

industrial city where the BHP steelworks is now closing. The entire Hunter Valley has been hard hit over the past two decades by the closure or scaling down of coal mines, electricity-generating stations and meatworks, and by the withdrawal of government, health and banking services.

For many residents of Merriwa, it was their first involvement in any kind of protest, especially a political one leading to a direct clash with the state government. Heather Payne, whose two children attend the school, and her friend Trudy Parker (who both work as volunteers at the school canteen) were typical of those who participated.

Payne said: "I decided to join the protest because we have lost so many facilities in the town. Telstra has taken away the one technician that used to service the area and the county council has cut its staff that maintains electrical services to only two men. There are no jobs in the area, so our young people have to leave home to find work. The removal of the classroom was just one thing too many."

Parker agreed: "We have lost a lot in the town, including health services. Four to five years ago we had maternity services and the hospital did minor operations. That has ended and now women have to go to Scone, well over an hour's drive away, to have their babies."

John Penninger, the owner of a local herb farm, was one of those arrested. Despite having no children at the school, he said it was his duty to protest: "I want the kids in this community to get an education in comparison to the kids in the city."

Another participant, Shirley Sharp, runs a sheep property with her husband and operates the town's travel agency and gift shop. "We've spent years dealing with an assortment of government bureaucrats and politicians," she said. "We have held three street marches in the town against the attempt to forcibly amalgamate our Rural Land Protection Board with the one at Mudgee and cut services. We have experience and that is why we were so determined and so well organised. I was confident that we would get the classroom returned because we backed them into a corner."

She went on to describe aspects of the crisis in rural areas: "This town, like a lot of rural centres, has lost a lot. Both the Commonwealth Bank and the Westpac Bank have withdrawn services. The National Bank is open only three days a week. Unemployment is high because most people are either rural workers or work for the county council. The council has cut its staff and properties cannot afford to hire rural hands."

Her own property had returned a negative income for the last five to six years. "I run this agency because we cannot make a living on the land. We are not even getting the price for lamb that we got 20 years ago. With the closure of the meat packaging plant at Aberdeen, there is no place to market meat locally."

Many residents said they were angered by the news that at least 300 portable rooms were undergoing refurbishment at the Cessnock prison for use at the Sydney 2000 Olympic games.

Media reports indicated that the government was diverting other demountable buildings from schools around the state for this purpose.

While spending on education and other vital services is being slashed, the state government will outlay at least \$2.3 billion for the games, an event that will generate hundreds of millions of dollars for big business. Funding for education in NSW has been reduced by some 20 percent in real terms over the last decade. The state has the worst teacher-student ratio in Australia.

The struggle that erupted at Merriwa was not just about the removal of a classroom but highlighted far wider problems afflicting rural Australia. For years, state and federal governments, both Labor and Liberal, have gutted public health, education, housing and community services.

Funding cuts have had a serious impact on rural communities. Of the poorest 40 areas in Australia, 36 of them are in rural or provincial areas. The rural suicide rate is double that of metropolitan areas. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's "Bush Talks" project found an increase of over 350 percent in the last 30 years in the suicide rates of young males (aged 15-24 years) in rural centres.

The project found that the rural town of Scone, 66 km from Merriwa, had seen the suicide of 12 young men living within a 50 km radius in 12 months. Yet the nearest psychiatrist for the area was at Maitland, well over an hour away by car, and with no after-hours service.

In the Upper Hunter Valley, unemployment is double the national average. Youth employment stands at over 25 percent, or three times the national rate.

The closure in April of the meat packaging plant at Aberdeen, 80 km from Merriwa, with the loss of over 400 jobs, swelled the ranks of those laid-off from area's power and mining industries. In the 12 months to April, job losses in the Hunter Valley totalled 4,000, over half of these in coal mining. The last 10 years has seen the destruction of over 19,500 state government jobs in rural NSW.

The continuing devastation of rural areas and the bureaucratic indifference of governments will no doubt provoke further resistance and struggle. Verina Rallings, speaking of the protest in Merriwa, said: "The Director of Education said he was disappointed in the way the parents behaved. That is just the classic example of how they were not listening to us. I think our stand will encourage other towns not to accept these cuts as just natural, as part of what happens to small towns. I hope it will help to make other people fight and to make sure that this does not keep happening."



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