"I wish I had done what she did"

Interviews with Australian teachers about Geraldine Rawson's Supreme Court challenge

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During the past decade the public education system in Australia has been radically transformed. The most obvious changes have been cuts to the government education budget, the dismantling and closure of schools, the elimination of teaching staff and the imposition of new curricula compatible with the requirements of business. What was once taken for granted—a government-funded free education system, accessible to all—has been progressively undermined.

Accompanying these measures have been moves to stamp out opposition from the teaching profession and the general community.

Nowhere has the ensuing attack on democratic rights been more blatant than in the southern state of Victoria. Between 1992-1997, despite determined community opposition, the Victorian Liberal government closed nearly 20 percent of all public schools. In 1993, in anticipation of resistance, the government implemented Teaching Service Order 140—legislation that prohibited teachers from making public comment on government education policy.

At the end of 1994, teacher union delegate John Glazebrook was sacked under the legislation and then in 1995 seventeen teacher unionists were placed under investigation for distributing material that was critical of the government's policies.

Those school communities that persisted in resisting the government's agenda were met with force. In December 1993, the government authorised a level-4 baton charge by police at Richmond Secondary College against parents and teachers who had occupied the school against its closure.

While some school communities attempted to fight on, the teacher unions toed the government's line, insisting that their members abide by the government's repressive legislation and remain silent about the victimisation of their colleagues and the deteriorating conditions in the schools.

As a result, solidarity among teachers slowly evaporated, leaving victimised teachers isolated and easily picked off. Open discussion and debate in staff meetings, a characteristic of life in public schools in the 70's and early 80's, was replaced by unchallengeable directives from the Department of Education. Permanency of tenure was eliminated and short-term teaching contracts introduced. Fearful of being named “in excess of school staffing requirements” and lacking any support from the union or any alternative way forward, the vast majority of teachers were intimidated into silence.

In 1995, the Socialist Equality Party established the Committee to Defend Public Education, launching a campaign against TSO140 and in defence of victimised teachers. The first teacher to speak out publicly and expose the undemocratic procedures being pursued in the teacher disciplinary process was Geraldine Rawson. Three years later, in November 1999 with the assistance of the CDPE, Rawson successfully challenged the validity of one of the key provisions of Teaching Service Order 140 in the Supreme Court.

In the aftermath of the court case, the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed two teachers about the impact of TSO140 on school communities and the significance of Rawson's case.

John Glazebrook, a union militant and critic of the education policies of the Kennett government was the first teacher to be sacked under TSO140. Initially he attempted to bring his case to the attention of other teachers through letters to the union journal. However, union leaders warned him that unless he remained silent, the union would stop paying his legal expenses and financing his appeal. In 1995 Glazebrook lost his appeal to the Merit Protection Board. He is now a taxi-driver.

Dianne Weaver is a secondary school teacher who joined the campaign to defend Rawson after coming in contact with the CDPE. She began teaching in 1989 and has been named “in excess” several times, confronting circumstances similar to those that Rawson faced.

WSWS: Could you describe the circumstances surrounding your dismissal?

John Glazebrook: In 1993 I was appointed to a new school after a number of differences with the principal over curriculum matters. The principal had complained about me because I had invited John Halfpenny, a leading trade unionist, to speak to my Australian Studies class about work in Australian society.

By the end of 1993 I had become actively involved in the union as the branch officer. The Kennett government had come to power at the end of 1992. A teacher had complained to me that the principal was coming into his class unannounced and inspecting him. As the union representative I approached the principal. He said I was causing trouble—that I had been writing to the union paper complaining about the principals being in the same union as the teachers. He said I was giving the school a bad name and bringing forward unwanted controversy.

At the time, when TSO140 was brought in, it was hard to get teachers to back you up. Lots of them were under enormous stress and feared being named in excess. The principal was pushing the idea that classroom management was an individual problem. This is not the case. The problem is the curriculum. It was developed outside the schools, many students found it irrelevant, became bored and disruptive.

More and more the role of the teacher was to become a prison

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officer. I don't think it is an exaggeration to use that analogy. Misbehavior, vandalism, all of the problems are because students are alienated from what is taught.

One of the teachers said to me that I should have known to keep my head down with the change of government. The culture at the school was that the union should go along with the principal. That year I organised 60 teachers to sign a petition opposing the government's new program “Schools of the Future”, which was the first stage of “self-managing schools”.

When I was sacked from the Department of Education all sorts of allegations about my teaching were made. But I believe the sacking was politically motivated. When I appealed to the Merit Protection Board, the Department of Education brought forward a file they had on me. Included in it was a copy of my Masters thesis from university, letters to local newspapers I had written opposing the government's education policy and a transcript of an interview held with me on community radio.

All the way through, the union demanded that that I abide by the confidentiality clauses of TSO 140.

WSWS: What is your reaction to the Supreme Court's ruling in Geraldine Rawson's case?

JG: I think the decision is a victory and a blow against the new Bracks' [Labor] government. The role of the SEP is highly commendable. They are the only organisation that has launched a defence of teachers' rights, through the Committee to Defend Education and sustained it. The union has done nothing to defend teachers except disempower them and blacken the names of those fighting. The method of gagging teachers has come about because of the collaboration of the union.

I think that the Bracks government should immediately reinstate Geraldine as a teacher and give her all her rights, including permanency. Geraldine was a victim of budgetary and political decisions, which has resulted in the scapegoating and victimisation of teachers.

It is fantastic that she was able to sustain her fight over the last few years against overwhelming odds, tremendous pressure and incredible stress. It is like a David and Goliath story and that is encouragement for everyone who has been victimised or wants to fight. She should be an inspiration to all.

WSWS: Could you describe the atmosphere that has prevailed in the schools under TSO140?

Dianne Weaver: I began teaching in 1989. This was before TSO140 was introduced in 1993. While I was never placed on charges I felt the school administration was heading in that direction.

I was named in excess in 1990, only a year and a half after beginning teaching.

Excess meant a dog eats dog atmosphere for jobs, especially where schools had declining enrolments. The staff room became divided, it was like a dysfunctional family situation. All sorts of attitudes developed around different teachers, which stuck and often spread outside the school.

Excess destroys your self-image and confidence. It is a terrible system because to name you in excess they have to find something wrong with you. I did not know where to go. There were some staff there who supported me but they were under pressure too.

When I approached the union for support they said that they had to protect the principal too because she was also a union member.

At the time the school was losing numbers and was on the borderline of being closed. The kids knew it was a question of numbers and they would say to teachers, “You need us”. As the numbers dropped the higher up teachers lost their time to do administration work and they were sent back into the classes. They were having difficulties just like everyone else, even though they would say some of us were incompetent.

If students were giving trouble and you sent them to the co-ordinators, then the co-ordinators wouldn't deal with the problem but use the opportunity to gather information about the teachers.

Many of the children who were at the school were from war-torn countries, such as Bosnia, Vietnam and Ethiopia. Some of them were emotionally disturbed and you were never informed. Sometimes they would be fine, just joking around, and then they could just change all of a sudden and become uncontrollably violent. I was terrified because there was no back up.

If you are a young inexperienced teacher you are naturally nervous and if you are kept being told that you are no good you start to believe it. I trusted people when I first started teaching. Now I find it difficult to be around teachers. I still get nervous. At one school I was told that I was not “groovy” enough.

WSWS: What do you think about the Supreme Court's decision regarding TSO140 and the stand taken by Geraldine Rawson?

DW: I think it is great what Geraldine has done, although I'm not sure whether it will make a great deal of difference. She was very brave. I didn't expect the decision in the Court because I don't have much faith in the justice system and I thought that the Department of Education was in a much more powerful position than it turned out.

When you are a contract teacher it doesn't put you in a position to fight for your rights. All you can think about is how to apply for the next job when your contract runs out. That becomes your only concern—it is in that way that they control you. Many of the older style principals who know this is a load of rubbish are leaving and a new breed of principals is being brought in, in line with the new education image.

In the teacher training colleges student teachers are told that the old teachers are no good. They should not be fed this, it is a complete lack of respect. I think there should be a combination of experienced and new teachers in the schools.

I don't think Geraldine could have done what she did without the support of the CDPE. The amount of research they did and all the preparation was enormous. There must be a combination of factors to win, you can't do it by yourself. You must have support and not just a good lawyer. Geraldine's fight gave me hope. I wish I had done what she did.

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