

NSW government wants to "eliminate restrictions"

Australian teachers continue their fight against new award

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5 February 2000

On Thursday New South Wales (NSW) public school and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers voted overwhelmingly for further strike action in their dispute with the Carr state Labor government, now in its fourth month. While the media is portraying the dispute as a campaign for higher salaries, the real issue is the government's attempt to impose a new award, which would destroy fundamental working conditions.

Following a 24-hour strike and a series of rolling stoppages last year, the NSW Education Department called for the dispute to go to arbitration. The hearings began in January, and, underscoring their anger, 1,000 teachers rallied outside the education department's head office, marking the first time such an action had taken place during the school holidays. After the rally about 50 teachers, some with placards, crowded into the small chamber inside the NSW Industrial Relations Commission (IRC).

Inside the commission, the real issues at the heart of the dispute were openly canvassed. The state government's case is that the ongoing transfer of federal government funds from public to private schools leaves it no other option but to impose complete "flexibility" on the working conditions of public school and TAFE teachers. The public school system, it argues, must learn to "compete in the education market place."

In reality the Carr government has encouraged the drift of students and funds to private schools no less than its federal counterpart. Its most recent salvo was to make public, through the daily newspapers, details of the bank accounts of every public school in the state. Parents were invited to conclude that the schools were piling up substantial financial resources, and that therefore the payment of "voluntary" school fees was unnecessary. The publication of this information was timed to coincide with

student enrolments. The intended result was not only to discredit the entire public school system but also to invite parents to withhold funds, something that occurred the last time school accounts were made public.

In the commission, the state government's barrister, Paul Menzies Q.C., drove the point home. "The state government accepts the proposition that there is competition between schools, accepts and embraces it..." He then called for the "elimination of restrictions" on teachers' working conditions, stating, "by 2003 the NSW public school system will be looking over a precipice."

According to Menzies this state of affairs had resulted from funding cuts to public schools imposed through the Australian federal government's Enrolment Benchmark Adjustment (EBA) formula.

The EBA formula was introduced as part of the Howard government's States Grants (Primary and Secondary Education Assistance) Act in 1996. The Act removed restrictions on private schooling and established a financial process that encouraged their expansion at the direct expense of public schools. Under its provisions, each time a student transfers from a public to a private school, federal government funding to the public system is cut by \$1,700 a year and approximately \$900 handed to the private system.

The formula means that although there were 8,000 more students in government schools in 1999 than in the previous year, because private school enrolments jumped by nearly 20,000, federal government funding to public schools was cut by \$30 million. In one example, public schools this year in the state of Queensland will lose \$5.8 million although almost 5,000 more students have enrolled. NSW faces the biggest cut, receiving \$16.6 million less.

The EBA has become a mechanism for systematically

gutting public education. According to the NSW Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations, public schools in NSW, the most populous state, need \$400 million "just to restore the parity they had five years ago." Capital expenditure has been cut 26 percent in the last three years. Over the same period, 24,000 more students from non-English speaking backgrounds enrolled at NSW public schools but the numbers obtaining support through the English-as-a-Second-Language Program have fallen by 4,000.

There is already a wide gap between the public and private sector. NSW's 479 poorest schools share, through the Disadvantaged Schools Program, a mere \$17 million in federal government funding while the 81 elite private schools are allocated \$100 million annually.

The EBA mechanism has played a central role in creating the conditions where parents feel they have no option other than to enrol their children in a private school. As public schools are run down, enrolments at private schools go up, helped by substantial government subsidies. In addition to the elite schools charging exorbitant fees, over recent years new low fee-paying private schools have opened up charging \$2,000 to \$3,000 per year. Since 1984, the proportion of high school students enrolled in government schools has dropped from 73 percent to 66 percent.

Arguing the government's case in the IRC, Menzies called for even deeper cuts to TAFE colleges than to general primary and secondary schools. Warning that within five years TAFE would cease to exist, he revealed that since 1983 TAFE's "market share" had plummeted from 100 percent to 23 percent.

The Carr government's case is that only when teachers have been "liberated" from the "restrictions" imposed by previous awards will the public education system be in a position to compete with the non-government sector. The award's proposals include: scheduling school and TAFE college teachers to work anytime between 7am and 10pm, Monday to Saturday, on a system of annualised hours; schools and TAFE colleges to be open 50 weeks per year; the introduction of individual contracts; and the possible employment of untrained staff as teachers.

Menzies cited a number of possible "scenarios" that the government is considering.

* Foreshadowing amalgamations and the "convergence of schools with TAFE colleges," he referred to a model that demonstrated the scale of the government's intentions: a site of "26,000 students, 17 campuses and 400 courses." No mention was made of what this would

mean in terms of staff cuts or school closures. In the neighbouring state of Victoria sweeping amalgamations nearly a decade ago resulted in the destruction of thousands of teachers jobs and the closure of hundreds of schools.

* Teachers would be appointed to a district or a "cluster", not an individual school. This would reduce teachers to the status of "itinerants." Arguing there was really nothing new in this proposal, Menzies referred to a provision in the first teachers' award of 1964 for "itinerant" teachers. Unlike then, however, they are now to become the rule rather than the exception. Teachers could be told to teach anywhere ("able to hop over the fence"), anytime ("capacity for teachers to teach... at unusual hours") and across disciplines—from primary school to tertiary level.

Menzies made clear that the Education Department demanded an end to "bureaucratic hindrances" and wanted complete flexibility in determining teachers' working conditions. In the name of better positioning public education to meet the challenges of a competitive market, the government system had to "offer something which the non-government sector has no capacity to offer," otherwise its existence was in the balance.

In his first speech of the year, Liberal Prime Minister John Howard underscored the unanimity between the federal government's perspective for public education and that of the NSW Labor government. Howard outlined a plan for schools to remain open an additional two hours a day—from 9am to 5 pm—the "same hours that parents work."

While the NSW teachers' union has expressed opposition to some of the measures outlined by Howard and the state government, it allowed the States Grants Act and the EBA to pass without a murmur of protest. Notwithstanding its campaign of rolling stoppages, the union fundamentally agrees with the new "competitive" framework for public education and is seeking the best means to arrive at deal with the NSW government.



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