

Australia:

Students, teachers and residents protest against suspension of high school principal

Erika Zimmer
27 March 2000

Students, parents and residents in Dubbo, a New South Wales regional centre, have held strikes and rallies to oppose the demotion and suspension of Dubbo High School principal Jim Carey. Earlier this month the Education Department suspended Carey, just before he was due to appeal against charges laid against him by the Carr state government's Child Protection Investigation Unit (CPIU).

Carey, a teacher with 32 years' experience, including 10 years as a principal, was originally demoted last year for "not properly managing an alleged incident between a teacher and a student" six years earlier in 1993. He is one of hundreds of teachers whose lives and careers have been torn apart by the unit, which the Labor government established in 1996 on the pretext of protecting children from paedophiles.

The unit, then called the Case Management Unit (CMU), launched an investigation into Carey following a 1997 telephone call to "Operation Paradox"—a government-initiated annual phone-in, where anonymous callers make accusations about suspected child abuse. Carey later received a formal complaint that in 1993, soon after he became principal at Coonamble High School, he failed to report an alleged incident involving a teacher and a student.

The teacher had allegedly exposed himself to a 17-year-old boy in a house where they both lived. The next day the teacher had informed Carey he was taking the rest of the year off without pay. The teacher had given no details, saying that his reasons were personal and he would rather not divulge them. Separately, the boy's mother had asked Carey to remove the boy and another son from the teacher's class. She too gave no reasons, nor did she lodge a complaint.

In April 1999 the CMU laid charges against Carey of not properly managing the alleged incident. Throughout the ensuing proceedings, Carey was not permitted to test the "evidence" used against him by cross-examining witnesses. In October, despite evidence that he had never been informed of the alleged incident and that no complaint had been made during his tenure, Carey was found guilty and demoted to deputy-principal, a verdict he immediately appealed.

According to the Unit, Carey should have suspected child abuse and reported the teacher. It was no defence that no allegation was made against the teacher involved. The Unit's terms of reference require that even suspicion of child abuse must lead to an investigation. The teacher would then have been assumed guilty until proven otherwise. That has now happened to Carey.

Following Carey's decision to appeal, education officials added two new charges against him. When Carey appealed these as well, the department suspended him from school duties, two weeks before the appeals were to be held. The appeal finally began in Sydney on March 13, only to be adjourned indefinitely the next day on legal grounds.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Dubbo High's teacher union representative, Ross Mason, denounced the process used against Carey. "No matter what the 'salary and status' of teachers, you only have to have one individual make a vexatious or malicious claim and your whole life is down the sewer. You are denied natural justice. You do not get to answer your accuser or cross-examine them. The burden of proof is totally reversed.

"Someone told me that they'd seen a press report in

late February or early March that there had been 400 complaints against teachers so far this year. That is 100 a week. Of those, 398 would be vexatious or flippant. Morale is through the floor. When I asked Year 11 students whether they would become teachers, they just laughed. It is a good job ruined.”

When Carey was suspended, Dubbo High School's 500 students walked out of school and joined a rally of 500 other protestors outside the education department's offices. The next day, after Carey was sent home to undertake “non-school work,” over 90 senior students held their school assembly outside Carey's house in the pouring rain, vowing that they would “never stop fighting” for him.

Alongside the students, Dubbo High School teachers have held stopwork meetings to condemn Carey's suspension. When Premier Bob Carr visited Dubbo 10 days ago to attend a conference, 600 protesters rallied outside the venue, demanding Carey's reinstatement and a parliamentary inquiry into the functioning of the disciplinary unit.

After Carr ignored the crowd, Dubbo High School student representative, Kate Williams, speaking to the rally, condemned Carr for “not having the guts to see natural justice is carried out”.

The extent of community anger has resulted in the local media, community leaders and even state Labor members of parliament condemning the Carr government and the education department. The *Dubbo Daily Liberal* has published a number of highly critical lead articles and editorials. One quoted Dubbo's mayor, a lawyer, who “likened the department's investigation of Mr Carey to the Star Chamber”.

Carey's victimisation provides a case study of how the discipline unit operates. The CMU, streamlined in 1999 and renamed the CPIU, serves the Carr government by creating an atmosphere of fear and suspicion in government schools, breaking up the solidarity between teachers and students and stemming teacher opposition to budget-cutting and the general undermining of public education.

Since the CMU was set up in 1996 well over 1,000 allegations have been investigated against teachers. Anecdotal evidence (neither the education department nor the teachers' union will supply statistics) indicates that hundreds of teachers have been hounded out of the education system on flimsy and trivial charges. Not

only can any physical contact between teachers and students be the basis of charges, any allegation, no matter how unfounded or malicious, can destroy a career.

In true witchhunt style, teachers who do not report or initiate investigations against other teachers can be subjected to serious charges, as Carey has been. Teachers' reputations and livelihoods have been permanently damaged. In at least three cases, teachers facing unproven allegations have committed suicide.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact