

Australia: State Labor government moves to dismantle public school staffing system

Erika Zimmer
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Under the guise of effecting gradual amendments to the way that the state's 60,000 public schools teachers are hired, the Labor government in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) is preparing to abolish the state-wide system of staffing schools, a move that will overturn teachers' fundamental working conditions and further widen the gap between rich and poor schools.

On February 4, Education Minister John Della Bosca announced that from the end of the second term in 2010, the staffing system will be augmented by "local selection", with school principals able to select the teachers they hire.

At present, teachers considered qualified to work in NSW public schools are placed on a central employment list. Those at the top of the list who meet the criteria that schools require to fill their vacancies are appointed without any involvement from principals.

This system, which underpins job security, provides for transfers to ensure the supply of qualified teachers to isolated rural districts and schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Teachers working for at least three years in such hard-to-staff schools accumulate points that entitle them to apply for a transfer to a school they prefer.

The education department fills vacancies according to a formula: first on the list are suitable teachers with priority, i.e., those in "overstaffed" schools, teachers returning from maternity or other leave, compassionate transfers and transfers for years of service in isolated or hard-to-staff schools. After the department has exhausted that list, new teacher applicants at the top of a waiting list are hired.

The government insists that the two methods of recruiting teachers can co-exist, with principals free to employ teachers from the departmental list or opt for local selection. Initially teachers will continue to be employed by the education department and receive centrally determined salaries and benefits, regardless of which of

the state's 2,200 public schools they work in. It requires no great leap of imagination, however, to foresee the next major step—if one accepts the argument that principals need to be able to hire teachers—that is expanding principals' budgetary powers, giving them the right to vary teachers' pay and conditions as they see fit.

A message posted to teachers by the department's director-general Michael Coutts-Trotter claims that the change will mean no job losses and no loss of tenure. This worthless assertion flies in the face of logic: how can principals be given the power to hire without the power to fire? No doubt the fact that up to 40 percent of NSW teachers are due to retire in the next six years has played some part in the government temporarily delaying proposing measures explicitly giving principals the power of dismissal.

In truth, the move represents a thinly-veiled step toward an agenda overwhelmingly rejected by teachers in the past: the introduction of fixed-term contracts for all teachers with salaries tied to so-called performance.

The current staffing system has long been the target of both Liberal and Labor governments who have seen it as a barrier to their devolution agenda, in which principals function as managers rather than educators and schools themselves, rather than governments, are responsible for making ends meet.

In 1989, the former Liberal government instituted a system of local selection in which principals hand-picked teachers. The notion of "flexible staffing" was introduced, giving principals the ability to alter the mix of teachers at their school. The measure met with widespread opposition from teachers and was shelved by the incoming Carr Labor government in 1995.

The retreat, however, was purely tactical. The issue emerged in 2000 with the publication of a government report recommending that individual principals be given the power to hire and fire. That year was marked by bitter

industrial disputation as the Carr government sought to implement a new award which “freed” teachers’ working conditions from “restrictions” so that public education could “compete in the education marketplace”. The award agreement finally stitched up between the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) and the government extended school opening hours, strengthened the teacher assessment review process and introduced the category of “temporary teacher”.

In 2004, the Carr government introduced legislation making the continued employment of school principals conditional on meeting a battery of benchmarks determined by the Education Department’s director-general. By linking employment to a school’s performance in statewide tests, the laws accelerated the re-imposition of narrow, test-centred teaching methods. They also placed pressure on principals to exclude students requiring the most attention, such as those with learning or behavioural difficulties, and to victimise teachers who failed to meet performance indicators. Moreover, by effectively scrapping principals’ security of tenure, the measures set a precedent to be used against all teachers.

The following year, the NSWTF signed an agreement with the government to open up the staffing system to partial local selection. The agreement gave principals the option of accepting a teacher from the department’s employment list or themselves interviewing the five teachers at the top of the list, and choosing the one they deemed the most suitable. The NSWTF helped introduce a scheme designed to trial a process for later expansion.

To defend teachers’ working conditions, including statewide staffing and security of tenure, means to challenge the proposition that chronically-underfunded public schools must be forced to “compete” in an “education marketplace”.

There is no question that schools in isolated regions must be able to compensate staff with generous housing, travel and locality allowances. However the vast majority of “hard-to-staff” schools have been the victims of severe funding shortages, combined with an increasingly cut-throat struggle between schools for enrolments.

After a generation of pro-market “reforms” there is now a vast chasm between schools in better-off areas and in socio-economically disadvantaged regions with the latter comprised of high concentrations of students from poor families, those with English language difficulties, indigenous students and disabled students. The latest measure will only widen the gulf. Well-resourced schools,

and those whose parents can donate or raise funds, will inevitably benefit at the cost of poorer communities.

The government claims to be acting in response to local pressure for individual schools to have more control over staffing. In reality, the entire shift is driven by Labor’s pro-business agenda. It consists of reducing spending on education and all other essential social services, and imposing a “user pays” framework in which parents feel compelled to pay for their own children’s education, either by sending them to private schools or by fundraising for their chosen public school. All the time, public education is being eroded, while billions are poured into increasingly wealthy private colleges.

More broadly, education is being subordinated to the narrow employment needs of the corporate establishment, and teachers are being disciplined to accept this process, and meet the related performance indicators, or lose their jobs or prospects of promotion or transfer.

Mindful of the intense hostility of teachers to the dismantling of long-held conditions, the NSWTF claims to oppose the government’s latest staffing measure and has foreshadowed industrial action. However, the union has no intention of carrying out a serious struggle. In fact, the government is so confident that the union will fall into line again that Education Minister Della Bosca told ABC radio he expected the changes to be finalised by the end of Term 1 on April 11, 2008.

Teachers should review the record not only of the Labor and Liberal governments but also the teacher unions in imposing the running down of public education. The record demonstrates that the NSWTF has no principled opposition to the underlying “free market” processes. Teachers need to consider the fundamental political questions raised. Widening education inequality can be addressed only by developing a mass movement against the dictates of the corporate profit system and their implementation by Labor and Liberal governments alike.



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