

Australia: NSW Labor government unveils performance pay regime for teachers

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14 June 2008

Far from backing down following a 24-hour strike by New South Wales (NSW) public school teachers against the dismantling of the statewide staffing system, the state Labor government has stepped up its offensive, announcing another far-reaching attack on teachers' working conditions.

On May 28, less than a week after teachers struck over the government's introduction of a scheme to empower school principals to hire teachers on a local basis, NSW Education Minister John Della Bosca announced a performance pay regime, to commence this month.

Until now, NSW public school teachers have been paid according to an incremental scale based on length of service, with classroom teachers usually reaching the top of the scale after 10 years. While movement up the scale depends upon annual performance reviews, signed off by the school principal, increments are rarely withheld.

The new scheme, which Della Bosca proclaimed "the most comprehensive in the nation," provides for a new level of seniority. No details of any higher salary scales have been released but the minister told the media the plan gave the government and the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) "a range of options for discussion in the negotiation of a new pay agreement".

The system requires teachers to apply for accreditation based on "standards of professional accomplishment and leadership" devised by the NSW Institute of Teachers, a body set up by the government in 2004. At this point the scheme is voluntary, but it begins a shift toward payment according to student results.

Opposition to performance pay has a long history. Originally introduced in Australia in 1862 as a cost-cutting measure, it was abolished in the early twentieth century, partly as a result of teachers' condemnation of the narrow, rote-based learning and test-based curriculum inherent in a system where teachers were remunerated according to student exam scores.

Performance pay was not revived in NSW until the late 1980s when, together with other Australian states, the government and unions introduced higher pay for Advanced

Skills Teachers (ASTs). The AST plan emerged out of the federal Hawke Labor government and Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) award restructuring "reforms". In the name of making Australian business "internationally competitive", the centralised wages system was replaced by "enterprise bargaining," in which pay rises were made conditional on trading off rights and conditions to drive up productivity rates.

ASTs were phased out in NSW in the early 1990s. They were opposed by teachers who felt the system was divisive and failed to meet its purported objective of keeping highly experienced teachers in the classrooms; instead ASTs were often roped into school administration.

In 2003, the Howard government's education minister, Brendan Nelson, backed the introduction of performance pay nationally and set up a National Institute of Quality Teaching and School Leadership to oversee the process. When his successor, Julie Bishop, foreshadowed tying education funding to the states to the adoption of performance pay, the move was condemned by teacher unions as a "dangerous" and "extremist" import from right-wing think tanks in the United States.

Then in 2006, Labor leader Kim Beazley unveiled his party's variant of performance pay, with a plan that would award "top teachers" up to \$100,000 annually if they agreed to work in disadvantaged schools.

Within two months of the election of the Rudd government, Education Minister Julia Gillard announced in January this year the new Labor government's intention to introduce performance pay and overhaul teachers' salary structures.

Gillard, like her NSW counterpart Della Bosca, is well aware of the hostility of teachers to payment according to student results, and was careful to package the measure within a supposedly educational, politically-neutral framework. She commissioned a university-based company to develop, by the end of 2008, standards against which teachers could be measured.

The bipartisan push for performance pay is not aimed, as

its proponents claim, at improving public education, but is part of a right-wing agenda to subordinate the education of students to the requirements of corporate Australia.

In the guise of rewarding the best-performing teachers, pay levels for most teachers will remain low. The only way to earn a decent salary will be to pursue a “career path” defined in terms of meeting performance benchmarks, adapting to revised curricula and acquiring new “competencies”—all set to satisfy the narrow vocational and skills needs of employers.

An all-rounded education will increasingly be available only to those students whose parents pay hefty private school fees. Most working class youth will only be able to access technical schooling geared solely to business requirements.

At the same time, the new system will accelerate the shift to private education, by helping to set up what will effectively become an employment market for teachers, in which the wealthiest or best endowed schools will pay more to attract the “top performers”.

This underlying agenda was underscored by the release, in the same week as Della Bosca’s announcement, of a paper by the Business Council of Australia (BCA), which represents the largest companies operating in Australia. The BCA report, *Teaching Talent: The Best Teachers For Australia’s Classrooms*, proposed a federal scheme similar to the one being implemented by the NSW government.

The BCA said its vision for education focussed on the necessity to “compete effectively in the global market of the 21st century”. Students needed “the knowledge, skills and values that will enable them to enter and be successful in a rewarding career or vocation”.

To this end, a “national certification system” was needed to recognise excellent teachers and provide a new career path, combined with a strategy to ensure that teachers “continue to learn and improve their teaching throughout their careers”.

Significantly, the BCA report tied performance pay to a “wider strategy” that included “giving school principals the authority to hire more of the teachers” because principals were best able to “know the needs of that school and to match those needs with the skills of potential teachers”.

The only difference emerged when the BCA proposal, announced in banner headlines, called for the “best teachers” to have the opportunity to earn “up to double the average teaching salary”—or about \$130,000 a year—in return for “meeting specific criteria”. Della Bosca dismissed the proposition as “ludicrous”, claiming that state governments could not afford to pay such salaries.

NSW teachers, like their counterparts in Victoria and around the country, now face state and federal Labor

governments determined to introduce this radical, pro-market blueprint, using the low salaries paid to public school teachers and the decayed condition of the chronically underfunded public system as the pretext. In so doing, they are counting on the full collaboration of the teacher unions. The NSWTF has voiced no objection to Della Bosca’s plan, except for the provision that teachers seeking accreditation will have to pay the application fees out of their own pockets. Likewise, the national union, the Australian Education Union (AEU), has no principled opposition to performance pay. In 2001, an AEU agreement with the Victorian Labor government initiated a link between performance criteria and pay increments. Then in 2004, the AEU signed up to a system that required schools to show continuous improvement in student test results in order to access funding.

To develop a genuine campaign against these measures requires, as a first step, the unification of the struggle of NSW teachers against the dismantling of state-wide staffing with that of Victorian teachers who oppose the AEU’s sell-out industrial agreement that cuts real pay for most teachers, drops the fight for smaller classes and sanctifies contract teaching.

Above all, teachers throughout the country need to make a decisive political break from Labor and its partners in the trade unions and adopt an alternative socialist perspective—one that challenges the very basis of the profit system itself. Instead of ongoing cuts and the destruction of teachers’ working conditions, the Socialist Equality Party insists that billions of dollars be allocated to provide free, high quality, fully resourced education that meets the intellectual, social and creative needs of all students.



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