

Australian teachers' union conference: bureaucrats block fight against Labor

Erika Zimmer
15 August 2008

The New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF), a union with some 60,000 members, held its annual conference last month, the first since the election of the Rudd government last November. While NSWTF leaders claimed that they and the national teachers union, the Australian Education Union (AEU), had played a pivotal role in sweeping Howard out of office, a notable feature of the conference was their determination to avoid any conflict with the Rudd government or its state Labor Party counterpart.

The immediate backdrop was the ongoing political crisis in NSW, Australia's most populous state, with the media speculating how many months Labor Premier Morris Iemma could hang on under conditions in which polling showed that his government's primary vote had sunk to a record low of 28 percent.

Already deeply unpopular due to the state's crumbling infrastructure in health, transport and other basic services, Iemma, has been labelled "a dead man walking" following his decision to push ahead with the privatisation of the state's electricity supply, a move opposed by 85 percent of the population. In the weeks before the conference, Iemma stood down Education Minister John Della Bosca, pending a police investigation into allegations of misconduct at a nightclub.

Despite its weakened position, the state government has not backed off from launching far-reaching attacks on public education on a number of fronts. However, any teacher expecting NSWTF leaders to go on the offensive against the government's assaults would have been sorely disappointed.

Although the NSWTF is purportedly in the middle of a major campaign to oppose the state government's dismantling of the state-wide staffing system, a move which undermines teachers' security of employment and disadvantages hard-to-staff schools, discussion on this issue was pushed almost to the end of the conference agenda, on the afternoon of the second day.

The complacent and self-congratulatory tone of the three-day conference was set by its theme statement. Entitled, *21st Century Conditions for 21st Century Learning*, the statement claimed that "Public schools and TAFE [Technical and Further Education] colleges offer education and training of the highest quality because of the dedication, effort and expertise of the teaching and support staff, students and parents."

This claim stood in complete contradiction to a study by Adam Rorris, contained within the conference papers distributed to the 600 or so delegates. The report, commissioned by the Australian Education Union, and published last month, found that federal and state government funding had created a massive gap between private and public schools. By 2005, private schools were benefiting from capital investment that was nearly three times the level per student received by public schools.

While annual capital investment in public schools nationally is approximately \$2.1 billion, the report estimated that this needed to almost double, to \$4 billion per annum, to match the private sector. In NSW, the Labor government spent \$426 per student on capital works in government schools, while private schools, thanks to generous handouts from the federal and state governments, spent almost three times as much at \$1,492 per student.

According to the study, NSW needed to spend an additional \$8 billion by 2020 to match private sector investment. The report also pointed to the "significant impact" that the state of school facilities had on the performance of students and teachers, creating "a resource incentive for families to move their children to the private sector".

The study's damning findings played no role in the set-piece debate and discussion during the three-day conference, which was wrapped up in record time. The only "action" proposed was the development of a publicity plan outlining the "recurrent and capital funding needs of public schools". Nobody pointed to the fact that parents, teachers and students, only too well aware of the dire funding shortfalls, were left with no other option but to desert government schools in droves.

Information set out in conference papers made it evident that TAFE NSW, like TAFE around the country, is well on the way to becoming privatised. According to NSWTF documents, between 1997 and 2006, the federal government cut funding to TAFE by 25 percent, while the NSW government cut was even deeper, at 30 percent, a shortfall equivalent to \$3 billion over nine years.

The state government required this shortfall to be met by raising TAFE fees. In a process similar to the "free market"

reforms implemented in the nation's universities, TAFE student fees and charges increased from 14 percent to 23 percent of revenue over the nine-year period, while the state government funding share dropped from 66 percent to 57 percent.

For the average TAFE NSW student studying part-time, a Certificate 4 course, which in 2003 cost \$260, now costs \$890. To this amount students need to add a further 40 percent to pay for resources and other course materials.

According to conference documents, the Rudd government's election promise to fund 820,000 additional training places over six years nationally would only benefit private providers. Tender prices for the first 20,000 training places were too low for TAFE colleges to compete. With an ever-greater proportion of TAFE funding opened up to competition with private providers, the result would be "no TAFE system, only a number of providers competing for funds... TAFE as we know it will not exist".

In a move to further cut education costs, and make TAFE competitive in the "education marketplace", the NSW Education Department announced last December the downgrading of TAFE teacher qualifications, from a university level teaching degree.

Recommendations proposed by the union pledged only to continue to "lobby" governments and launch yet another media campaign to "highlight the need for increased funding for TAFE".

In February, the state government unilaterally announced changes to the way public school teachers are hired. The system of appointing teachers from a central employment list would be "augmented" by "local selection". The move represented a thinly-veiled step toward handing hiring and firing powers to school principals, which would open the door to victimisation and intensify the competition between schools for students, teachers and funds.

Having signed an agreement in 2005 to open up the system to partial local selection, the union offered to go further, suggesting a "different mix of staffing appointments".

What this means was clearly spelled out at the conference. According to the union, the 2006-7 and 2007-8 staffing statistics showed that 900 classroom teaching positions were filled by permanent teachers transferring between schools, while 300 places were filled through the misnamed Permanent Employment Program (PEP), a union-agreed scheme that allows principals to appoint casual teachers. At the conference, the union offered to change the ratio of transfers to PEP to 60:40 in a new staffing agreement, which would only help dismantle centralised staffing.

Conference delegates were uneasy about this patent sell-out and one delegate was loudly cheered when he called for "no more concessions". However, no one attempted to speak against the union's proposal.

On the final day of the conference, in an effort to provide

themselves with a "militant" cover, the union bussed delegates to the Education Department for a stage-managed rally, which was beamed via You Tube and Sky Channel to teachers across the state. To loud applause, NSWTF president Maree O'Halloran condemned political leaders for, "phasing out in practice teacher transfers across the state, a policy which offloaded the responsibility onto schools and communities themselves to find teachers at a time of teacher shortage".

Teachers and principals from country areas, those in the immediate firing line of the staffing proposals, delivered angry speeches to accompanying cheers, chants and whistles from delegates, denouncing the government's agenda.

At the conference itself, however, the union's vague proposals for stopwork meetings in August and throughout Term 3, first outlined at its June council meeting, were made even more conditional. Any decision to go ahead with industrial action will first have to be ratified at the next union council meeting on August 16.

After the rally, the WSWs spoke to a number of teachers who condemned the conference as a sell-out. One teacher, who said she had been coming to the union's annual conferences for 20 years, stated, "This one was the worst ever. But what can we do? If the union won't defend education, there's nothing we can do."

This view reflects sentiments felt by broad layers who no longer have any confidence in the NSWTF and AEU leadership but as yet see no way forward against the unions' enforcement of Labor's pro-market program. Outside the conference, many teachers took copies of leaflets circulated by supporters of the Socialist Equality Party, including the SEP statement "Why Victorian teachers should vote 'no' to the AEU-Labor government agreement", which raised the necessity for a new political perspective.

The statement posed the following question: "Is public education to remain an under-resourced, second-rate system reserved for those whose parents are unable to afford private schooling, and whose central task is simply to provide students with the skills demanded by business—or should billions of dollars be spent to ensure a free, universally accessible, quality school system that gives all children the opportunity to fully develop their talents, capacities, and interests?" The latter alternative requires a political struggle against the dictates of the "free market" being enforced by the Rudd and Iemma Labor governments. Society must be reorganised on socialist lines, subordinating wealth and technology to the needs of the vast majority, not corporate profit.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact