

Australia: Why NSW teachers should vote “no” to the NSWTF-Labor government agreement

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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The Socialist Equality Party calls on New South Wales (NSW) public school teachers to vote "no" on February 6th to the sell-out agreement on staffing and salaries brokered by the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) and the Rees Labor government.

A "no" vote must initiate a coordinated industrial and political campaign by public school and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers in every state against the imposition of free market economic reforms on the public education system.

Friday's "broadcast meetings" called by the NSWTF underscore the union's contempt for the democratic rights of its members. After bureaucratically cancelling the 48-hour strike scheduled for January 28-29, the union arranged meetings for 8.40 a.m., across dozens of separate locations, with a guarantee of "minimal supervision" at schools and a directive that members be back at work "by 10.30 a.m. at the latest". All genuine discussion and debate is being suppressed, while the union's rotten deal with the Rees government is being presented as a fait accompli.

What has changed in the two months since November? Then, teachers voted down the Rees government's offer. The new deal, struck on January 21, provides only cosmetic adjustments. It will halve teachers' sick leave, substantially reduce workers compensation entitlements and streamline dismissal procedures. Centralised staffing will be formally overturned, with half of all appointments to be made via local principal hire, thereby facilitating the shift to "school autonomy"—the centrepiece of Rudd's plans for a national education marketplace.

The 2009 school year has opened under conditions of the most severe economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Like its counterparts throughout the world, the Rudd government has responded with emergency bailouts, funneling billions of dollars of public money into the banks and financial institutions. The \$42 billion emergency stimulus package unveiled on Tuesday, which includes \$15 billion for primary and secondary school buildings, will do nothing to avert the economy's plunge into recession. Nor will it reverse decades of government neglect that has produced a shameful decay in public school infrastructure. The latest estimate of public school under-funding published by economist Adam Rorris from the Centre for Policy Development in June 2008, found that capital spending would have to rise

by \$2.2 billion annually—or \$1.5 million a year for every public school—to even match comparative spending in the US and the UK. Once Rudd's one-off handout is divided among all 9,540 public *and private* primary and secondary schools, his "largest ever commitment to the schools system" turns out to be somewhat less impressive.

The federal Labor government is demanding that teachers, along with millions of ordinary working people, pay for the failure of capitalism by sacrificing their wages, working conditions and living standards. The union is seizing on the economic crisis to pressure teachers to accept a 12.48 percent pay increase over three years. This amount—barely one percent higher than the pay offer rejected by teachers in November—does not even begin to compensate them for their countless hours of unpaid overtime: preparing lessons, attending meetings, writing reports and dealing with the myriad educational and social problems confronting students. Nor will it do anything to reverse the shortage of staff throughout the state that has seen one in every five teachers instructing outside their subject area.

Rudd's "education revolution": the real agenda

Rudd's pronouncements over the past week that "the 30-year era of neo-liberal free marketeering is over" are a fraud. His government is launching a new wave of market reform throughout the economy. This is the meaning of Labor's "education revolution". After decades of deliberate degradation, public schools will now be subject to the full blast of market forces. In line with this agenda, a punitive regime of national testing has commenced. Its aim is not to provide better resources and funding to public education, but to punish "underperforming" teachers and schools, further accelerating the shift to private education.

The NSW agreement on staffing and salaries is part of a broader assault. It is the latest in a series of deals imposed by the Australian Education Union and all state and territory governments, lowering teachers' working conditions and pay, and facilitating new national curriculum and funding arrangements.

On January 1, Rudd's performance-based school funding took effect in all schools nationally. After base-line testing last year, round two is scheduled for May, with the results slated for publication towards the end

of this year.

Labor's "education revolution" mirrors the market-driven reforms imposed on schools in New York City and Florida. The "New York Model", devised by former CEO Joel Klein, an appointee of billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg, ranks all schools based on test-score gradings from A to F. So far, this punitive ranking system has resulted in the closure of 70 public schools and the sacking of entire teaching staffs.

The NSW agreement supports these regressive aims. The union has endorsed measures empowering principals to hand-pick teachers, while "underperforming" staff will have to show "improvement" in a fixed period or face dismissal, regardless of illness or other circumstances.

The concept of government responsibility for the provision of universal public and secular education is being jettisoned. According to Rudd and Gillard, the market is the most effective means of delivering educational "outcomes". This was blurted out in a recent paper published by the Australian Council of Education Research (ACER). According to ACER's Dr Andrew Dowling: "The idea that market forces can advance society much more effectively than government intervention, is, in fact, one of the major reasons behind the introduction of student testing on a large scale."

Far from market forces "advancing society", teachers, parents and students in Australia and throughout the world are right now confronting the devastating consequences of the free market. What exactly will it do for schools? While Rudd and Gillard have declared that their "education revolution" relies on the active support of business, in 2009 the major banks and corporations will be struggling just to stay afloat! The market-model for schools will be a disaster. Indeed, over the past weeks public school principals have reported a surge in enrolments, as parents, unable to afford hefty private school fees, shift their children back into an already overstretched and under-funded public school system.

Demand for high-quality public education has never been greater, yet the Rudd government is shovelling billions more into the private system. SCEGGS Redlands, situated in Sydney's leafy Mosman, has lost 259 students over the past five years, suffering a \$5.5 million loss in fee revenue. But these figures are just the tip of the iceberg. As superannuation investments and share values continue to fall, fee revenues across the entire private system are being hit. As Murdoch's education writer Maralyn Parker mused in her *Daily Telegraph* blog two weeks ago, the effects of the global financial crisis will confront many private schools with the prospect of bankruptcy: "If it can happen to Lehman Brothers it can happen to a NSW private school," she wrote.

The way forward

At stake is nothing less than the future of public education. Rudd's "education revolution" will deepen the already savage inequalities at the heart of Australia's school system. Performance testing will produce winners and losers, with "failed" schools—i.e., those with the fewest resources—reduced to little more than holding pens for the most disadvantaged youth, while schools in wealthier areas will attract better funding and staff pay. Private schools will receive a massive boost.

Far from the unions being a vehicle to fight this agenda, they are its greatest asset. The NSWTF and the education unions nationally are

working to enforce the Rudd government's pro-market reforms, just as they have imposed every one of the attacks on teachers' conditions over the past two decades.

In 1999, teachers took to the streets again and again in opposition to the Carr government's teachers' award, which demanded that public schools "compete in the education market place". In 2000 the NSWTF signed off on Carr's new award, extending the school day and introducing temporary and contract teachers.

In 2004, the union refused to mobilise a single teacher in opposition to principals being placed on performance-based employment. Now with the public school system in an advanced state of disaggregation the next step is being implemented: full principal control over staff numbers and salaries. Teacher transfers will be virtually eliminated and only available in difficult-to-staff rural schools or schools in impoverished suburbs. All school decision making will be dictated by the need to remain competitive. Contract teaching, casualisation, downgrading of qualifications, are the logical trajectory.

The government's demands for TAFE teachers—that they accept a 20-50 percent increase in their workload and compete with private providers—must serve as a warning. It shows what is in store for the school system. Already, more than 50 percent of TAFE teachers' jobs have been casualised, in the name of making TAFE competitive.

It is time to put a stop to this agenda. The SEP calls for a "no" vote and for a ban on the Rudd government's regressive national testing regime, along with a demand for nation-wide bans. Market-based performance pay must be rejected. The all-rounded intellectual, physical and cultural development of students is incompatible with a competitive system based on market forces! No progressive solution to the crisis can be found within the framework of the capitalist system. If the working class—the vast majority of the population—is to defend its interests, it must advance its own independent solution to this crisis.

The wholesale failure of the market calls for a fundamental reorganisation of economic and social life. The major banks and financial institutions must be nationalised and transformed into public utilities under the democratic control of the working class. In this way trillions of dollars can be made available for education and to guarantee decent jobs, health care and housing for all, including the launching of genuine public works programs to provide employment and rebuild the country's decayed physical, economic and cultural infrastructure.

The working class must break the grip of the financial aristocracy and take political power into its own hands through the establishment of a workers' government. This requires a political break with the entire official political establishment—Labor, the unions, the Greens and all their apologists—and the building of the Socialist Equality Party as the mass revolutionary party of the working class.



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