

Australia: Teachers Federation annual conference: a green light for Labor's pro-market "education revolution"

Erika Zimmer
22 July 2009

Last week's New South Wales Teachers' Federation (NSWTF) annual conference, held amid mounting public anger over the publication of school league tables, served to hose down opposition among teachers to the Rudd government's pro-market education reforms.

In the face of near universal condemnation by education professionals of the Rudd government's National Assessment Plan-Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests and associated high-stakes school ranking system—the chief concern of union officials was to help ram through Labor's reforms.

In the plush surrounds of the Sydney Convention Centre at Darling Harbour, Australian Education Union (AEU) president Angelo Gavrielatos established the political tenor of the conference on day one, telling 600 delegates from across the state that union activists had helped remove the Liberal Party government from office, and their task now was to "civilise the ALP".

Gavrielatos talked up the Rudd government's Building the Education Revolution (BER) stimulus package as the biggest boost to education in Australia's history. His claims were belied by guest speakers Jim McMorrow and Adam Morris, who presented evidence that Labor's BER funding—a massive \$14 billion windfall to private contractors—would fail to reverse entrenched inequality throughout the school system.

Labor's pro-market agenda was swept under the table. Regressive education policies first proposed by former conservative prime minister John Howard, including standardised testing and performance pay for teachers, are being enforced with the full backing of the union.

NSWTF Deputy President Gary Zadkovich told delegates who opposed performance pay and other right-wing measures that the union could not be relegated to a position of "irrelevance" in the face of reforms "rolling towards us".

Gavrielatos's perspective of "civilising the ALP" is utterly futile. In 2007 Rudd won the support of the Murdoch press and prominent sections of Australia's corporate elite after repeatedly attacking the Howard government from the right and accusing it of backing away from the "free-market" reforms championed by the Hawke and

Keating Labor governments between 1983 and 1996.

League tables

With overwhelming hostility among delegates to the publication of school league tables, NSWTF officials were forced into damage control. A union executive, Michael De Wall lampooned Gillard's enthusiasm for Joel Klein, New York's Schools Chancellor who has led a city-wide reform of the education system along corporate lines. His remarks, peppered with Frank Sinatra lyrics and suggestions that Gillard be renamed "ol' blue eyes" drew laughter and applause but blocked any serious discussion of why Klein's reforms—which have resulted in the closure of dozens of schools, mass teacher sackings and increased privatisation—have been adopted by the Rudd government.

Media coverage following the NSWTF conference reported that an "intense campaign of industrial action" was resolved against league tables. The union's official recommendation to conference did nothing of the sort. It proposed a *threatened* ban on 2010 NAPLAN tests conditional on "the 2009 NAPLAN results and/or other tests (being) misused to produce school leagues." The purpose of this weasel resolution, disingenuous from start to finish, was to let off steam, appeasing teacher anger, while allowing Rudd's national ranking system to proceed.

Whether crude "league tables" are published by the tabloid press is not the major issue—they are assembled based on information that will be publicly available via Labor's new Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA) website. Even without "league tables" the outcome of ACARA's comparative data will be the same: schools divided into "winners" and "losers" based on standardised test scores, with punitive sanctions falling on schools that fail to lift test "outcomes".

While league tables are generating public concern, they are just the tip of the education reform iceberg.

TAFE and AMES

The conference item, *Post School Education*, revealed the rapidity with which Rudd's education reforms are proceeding. The Adult Migrant English Service (AMES) and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) are being privatised, foreshadowing what is in store for public schools.

Teachers from AMES told the conference 80 percent of courses were being put out for tender, with AMES teachers forced to compete with private providers. According to an AMES information sheet distributed to delegates, "increasing numbers of retiring permanent teachers [are] being replaced with temporary and casual teachers causing AMES to adopt employment practices unheard of in the past, all in the name of 'flexibility' and 'competition'".

TAFE delegates reported the Rees Labor government in NSW was ramping up its demands for an increased work-load for the sector's teachers: an additional 118 hours annually, representing 6 weeks' extra work per year. For head teachers in TAFE the situation is even more dire. Their hours will increase by 154 over the course of a year! The additional work-load would lead to the destruction of thousands of casual TAFE teaching jobs and hundreds of permanent teacher positions.

Already 70 percent of the TAFE workforce has been casualised. In 2008, TAFE teacher qualifications were downgraded from a university degree to a Certificate Four qualification. One TAFE teacher who spoke from the floor explained that a private training organisation awarded Certificate Fours to passengers on a cruise ship, if they would agree to attend a few lectures.

Despite these far-reaching attacks, a report on *Post School Education* was shunted to the last agenda item on the conference's final day. It was listened to with indifference by officials on the platform. In the face of the destruction of TAFE as a public education entity, NSWTF executives have deliberately isolated TAFE teachers from their school colleagues and allowed the privatisation of TAFE and AMES to proceed.

Performance pay and firing rights

During the conference Federation officials embraced the concept of increased principal autonomy, including performance pay and principals' hiring and firing rights. These are central to Rudd's "education revolution".

In line with the federal government's Teach for Australia program and the state Labor government's High Achievement Teachers Scheme (HATS), the union unveiled its own "new classroom teacher qualification". Teachers will compete for a limited number of positions on higher pay rates, overturning the long standing practice of

teachers being paid according to qualifications and years of experience. With the assistance of the union, a new regime is being ushered in through which pay rates will increasingly be determined by principals, along corporate lines.

A further item put up by the union, *Professional Learning and Performance Management*, "empowers" principals to dismiss teachers. In urging its adoption, Zadkovich claimed that teachers' job security would be best secured by... beefing up dismissal procedures. Principals lacked the "courage" to deal with "underperforming" teachers and simply passed them on to another school as "nominated transfers" when declining student enrolments dictated the removal of "excess" staff.

The union's rightward shift produced unease and even hostility among conference delegates, with officials repeatedly jeered or challenged from the floor. Under these conditions delegates from the middle-class Socialist Alliance protest group, including John Morris and Pat Donohue, played a critical role. They bolstered illusions that the union could be pressured to fight and, in their only counter-resolution (on performance pay), called for salary negotiation to be kept "in union hands." They advanced no political alternative to the Rudd government's pro-market "education revolution".

Throughout 2008 teachers in every Australian state and territory took industrial action against far-reaching attacks on teacher pay and conditions and chronic under-funding of public education. But their opposition was suppressed by the union, as it rammed through a series of new staffing and salaries agreements to facilitate uniform national conditions in line with Rudd's reform agenda. The central issue confronting all teachers—school, TAFE and AMES—is to make a decisive political break from the nationalist and pro-capitalist agenda of Labor and its union apologists and turn to the building of an independent movement of the working class as a whole on the basis of a genuinely progressive, socialist perspective.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact