Australia: NSW teachers union censors debate at mass meeting

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28 August 2009

Nearly 2,000 teachers packed the Grand Pavilion at Rosehill Racecourse last night for a meeting opposing the publication of school league tables. Primary and secondary teachers attended from throughout the Sydney metropolitan region.

The meeting demonstrated sweeping opposition to the Rudd Labor government's assault on education, including standardised literacy and numeracy tests, which have been packaged as a "reform" but will be used to rank schools. Results from Labor's NAPLAN (National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy) exams, will be published for the first time later this year, resulting in the publication of school league tables that will stigmatise schools in the most socially disadvantaged areas.

Both Rudd and Education Minister Julia Gillard have threatened sanctions against schools that perform badly in the national tests or that fail to lift their results against so-called "like schools".

But the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) and a coalition of education groups, including the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations (P&C) and the NSW Secondary Principals Council, worked to block any struggle against the Rudd government's measures. Various state MPs—including the Liberals, Greens and the right-wing Christian fundamentalist Reverend Fred Nile—were invited to address the meeting, but long-time teacher and Socialist Equality Party member, Erika Laslett was physically prevented from speaking.

As Laslett began addressing the meeting to move a motion that had been distributed to teachers as they arrived at the venue, NSWTF officials intervened to stop her. The motion called for a national boycott of Rudd's NAPLAN tests and the launching of an independent political struggle against the Labor government's pro-market education reforms.

NSWTF vice-president Gary Zadkovich seized the microphone from Laslett, a 63-year-old English teacher, who was silenced with the complicity of the entire official platform, including Greens MP John Kaye. The meeting chair, P&C President Di Griblin, refused to acknowledge Laslett's insistence that a full democratic discussion be allowed for all those in attendance.

The union's attack on Laslett and its suppression of the Socialist Equality Party's motion must serve as a warning to all teachers: far from opposing league tables, the union is working hand-in-glove with the Rudd government—and with all of the parliamentary parties—to ram through Labor's "education revolution".

Teacher anger toward the state and federal Labor governments was on display from the outset. When apologies were conveyed to the meeting from Labor's Minister for Education Verity Firth, her name was greeted with jeering and hissing.

The task of deflecting this anger was left to the various MPs (including Nile who openly praised Gillard's "courageous" education reforms) and to NSWTF president Bob Lipscombe. Teachers were told to place their faith in a Greens-sponsored parliamentary amendment legislated in June, which prevents newspapers from publishing league tables.

As the Socialist Equality Party explained in its leaflet distributed prior to the meeting, "The Greens amendment is a cynical diversion. The issue teachers confront is not simply the publication of league tables by the *Daily Telegraph* and other newspapers. The Rudd government's entire NAPLAN test regime and national ranking system must be overturned."

Shadow education minister and deputy leader of the NSW Nationals, Adrian Piccoli, told the meeting that opposition to league tables had united "everyone" and cut right across the political spectrum. He claimed that those on the platform had been at the forefront of the fight against publishing "crude" league tables and declared that "the Liberals and Nationals remain completely opposed to *simplistic* league tables in NSW". [emphasis added]

Piccoli's use of the term "simplistic" and "crude" is significant. While the Liberals and Nationals—like the Greens—have postured as league table opponents, they have condemned only those rankings published by media outlets. Far more significantly, they have passed legislation empowering Labor to push ahead with the publication of punitive school rankings—defacto national league tables—via Gillard's new ACARA (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority) website. The rankings are based on NAPLAN test results.

At last night's meeting the NSWTF carried out a massive snow job. While Piccoli was presented as an ally of teachers, just two months ago he told the NSW parliament that: "I understand what the Commonwealth [i.e., the Rudd Labor government] is doing. It wants the data, and it will use that data to ascertain how future funding will be provided, et cetera. That is all fine. The only condition the state government had to put on the agreement was that the Commonwealth put in place the same protections that are in place in NSW. That is all the state government had to do."

In other words, the Liberals and National have no disagreement with Labor's national ranking system, which will tie school funding to test scores, creating competition between schools and a national education marketplace.

In a similar vein, Greens upper house MP John Kaye was presented by Griblin as "a great advocate for public education". During his 10 minute address, Kaye condemned the Rudd government for its "commodification of education" and denounced the concept of school rankings based on NAPLAN test score data, winning loud applause from teachers. Yet these very measures have been put in place with the support of the Greens.

In moving the Greens amendment in the upper house in June, Kaye specifically assured fellow MPs that his amendment posed no threat to the overall thrust of Labor's agenda: "This legislation," he declared "is significant because it does not stop two things. First, it does not stop state and federal governments doing the things that are authorised to be done by the relevant national agreement: it does not prohibit the passage of data

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from the state government to the commonwealth government, and it does not prohibit the Commonwealth Government from publishing that data... Secondly, the legislation does not interfere with the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority website. In other words, it does not stop the publication of school rankings on that website..."

There could be no clearer proof of the Greens' defence of Labor's measures.

The NSWTF and its allies in the Public Education Alliance also provided a platform for arch right-winger Fred Nile, who used his allotted time to openly praise Labor's reforms. Teachers, he declared, should be "realistic" and accept measures that would expose poorly performing schools, teachers and students. His address was greeted with justified outrage by the audience, with repeated interjections and slow hand-clapping.

In his own remarks, NSWTF president Bob Lipscombe demagogically replied to Nile's call for a "truce" between the NSWTF and the state Labor government: "there will be no truce by the NSWTF until league tables are abandoned".

A truce implies the prior existence of a conflict. But Lipscombe and the NSWTF have already signed up to Gillard's NAPLAN test regime, have agreed to facilitate reporting via the ACARA website and are enforcing every one of the free-market measures being demanded by Rudd and Gillard, just as they have collaborated with successive Labor and Liberal governments over the past three decades.

This is precisely why Lipscombe and other officials moved to suppress debate and discussion at the meeting. Having read the SEP's motion, Lipscombe instructed the chair to unilaterally cut question time from 20 minutes to just five, with fellow official Gary Zadkovich resorting to outright thuggery to ensure the SEP's motion was not heard.

Just three teachers were given time to ask questions. One of these, a young teacher who was clearly opposed to the union's suppression of discussion, demanded to know "When is there going to be some action—a march or rally—where Federation members can let their views be heard? Because it's clear they aren't being allowed at this meeting." How were teachers going to be mobilised for future meetings, she asked, if all they heard were views like Fred Nile's?

The SEP urges all teachers, in NSW and throughout the country, to read and circulate its leaflet and motion distributed at last night's meeting and to draw the lessons from the union's outright suppression of discussion and debate. The only way that a struggle against league tables and the entire NAPLAN test and ranking regime can proceed is in direct political opposition to Labor and the unions, on the basis of the socialist strategy outlined in the SEP's motion.

Both before and after the meeting, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke with teachers. Joseph Zeko, a NSWTF representative at Fairvale High School in western Sydney, said: "I am totally opposed to the Rudd government's reforms. It's a form of elitism.

"In America when they have done these things—league tables—principals were sacked from their position and, secondly, teachers who could not lift the performance of their students subsequently were also relieved of their position. Schools were closed and then privatised. That's why I am opposing these measures, strenuously and at all costs."

Mirja Sharif, a head science teacher from Chifley College in Mt Druitt, said: "League tables are wrong on every level. It will lower the quality of teachers and have a detrimental effect on the worst socio-economic areas and the poor. Schools sitting at the bottom of the table will be stigmatised and have their moral and self-esteem lowered in the community.

"This policy has been used in the UK and the US and the results have been a disaster. We should learn this lesson and not allow league tables. We should be discussing how to provide better educational opportunities and facilities.

"Every kid entering the front gate of a school should be given the best education possible. Schools shouldn't be just about teaching kids how to perform better for league table testing."

Voula Facas, a visual arts high school teacher, said: "I don't want what happened in 1997 when the *Daily Telegraph* published the results of students from Mt Druitt on its front page. This had a terrible impact.

"We lost student numbers and there was a high turnover of staff, students were stigmatised and couldn't get jobs simply because they were from Mt Druitt. They were spat at on trains and victimised because they were from that school and although they won the legal case against the newspaper, and were compensated, it destroyed a lot of lives. We have four teachers here today from that school who lived through that and we don't that to happen to our kids again."

Asked what she thought was behind the government's reforms, Fracas said: "I really don't understand why, considering that studies from overseas show this is not productive, they are repeating something that hasn't worked? National testing becomes the national curriculum and everyone goes backwards.

"What we are doing here today has got to be the beginning of the fight against this policy and I agree with you that there has to be a national campaign involving teachers and parents."

Another teacher said: "This campaign has to be taken to the wider community. The problem at the moment is that teachers are doing all the fighting against league tables. We've got to get the message out to parents.

"My friend is a teacher at Coonamble Public School, right out in the west, and their testing results will be low because it is a traditionally disadvantaged area. Publishing a finding saying that Coonamble isn't doing well isn't going to help anyone living there. The parents won't be able to send their kids to any another school—it is the only public school within hundreds of kilometres.

"It is a socio-economic question and people in the city forget about the country towns. My friend grew up in Coonamble and was given the drive and ambition to go to the city and study to be a teacher so she could go back and help her area. Nothing is written in the press about this sort of thing and how league tables will destroy initiative like this.

"Teachers need to express clearly to parents what is at stake. Parents are being fed the line: 'Don't you want to known what's going in your school?' I'm a parent and a teacher and, of course, I want to know what's going on but this isn't what league tables are all about.

"Labor has forgotten its roots and is too lazy to get out and put the resources where they need to be. They need to help the disadvantaged schools. They don't go near the schools that need help."

Nicole Malcolm, a Year 1 teacher at Auburn North Public School in Sydney, said she was "dumfounded" as to why the union cut off discussion at the meeting. "I have no idea why that happened." She said she would be raising the issue with the union. "Every teacher I know opposes league tables," she added. "The politicians were allowed to get their point of view across, but not the teachers."

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