

Australian teachers union calls for streamlined dismissals

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New South Wales (NSW) public school teachers discovered on the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* earlier this month a call by their union for teacher dismissal procedures to be streamlined.

NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) deputy president Gary Zadkovich proposed the creation of a special taskforce to facilitate the removal of so-called under-performing teachers.

Zadkovich told the newspaper's education editor: "We believe the [state education] department should establish designated senior officers whose sole responsibility is to directly support principals and executives in schools in implementing performance management procedures." He declared that those teachers who failed to improve after a ten-week program should be dismissed.

Zadkovich's announcement spelt out more blatantly the thrust of a recommendation he introduced at the union's annual conference in July. That conference assisted in paving the way for the implementation of the federal Labor government's "education revolution," whose central aim is to better meet business demands for a more productive workforce.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd laid out the punitive content of the "revolution" in a speech to the National Press Club last August. His proposed measures included the publication of national league tables based on schools' test results, tying school funding to these test results, shutting down schools deemed "under-performing," introducing so-called performance pay for teachers, and bringing university graduates without teaching qualifications into the public school system. Schools failing to meet performance indicators would face "tough action".

Such measures cannot be imposed without the introduction of mechanisms to intimidate or remove teachers who resist or oppose this agenda, with the first step being to give school principals hiring and firing rights. In February, the NSWTF duly signed off on a salaries and staffing agreement with the state Labor government that handed to school principals hiring rights.

At the July union conference, Zadkovich went further. After citing a report that a state secondary principals' conference in June applauded the moves to grant them hiring rights, he complained that "the elephant in the room" was the 1,000 teachers annually designated as "nominated transfers".

Principals can nominate teachers for transfer to another school when student enrolments decline or a school is closed or amalgamated. At the conference, Zadkovich equated teachers in this category with those deemed "poorly performing". He told the delegates: "We need to be honest and do something positive about poor performance. We should put an end to the excuses of principals who get rid of their problems by moving teachers via the nominated transfer system. Given the number of nominated transfers each year, it is a policy black hole."

Because of the stigma attached to nominated transfers, the union is claiming that only by maintaining a "credible system of dealing with poor performance" can teachers' tenure rights be protected. In reality, the opposite is the case: the accelerated mechanisms to dismiss nominated transfers will be used against any targeted teacher, including those whose students perform poorly on standardised tests, and those opposed to such narrow testing or any other aspect of Rudd's agenda.

Teachers have long defended their security of tenure,

partly on the grounds that it compensates for lower rates of pay, but also because those who fail to toe the official line or who are in any way regarded as trouble-makers can easily be destabilised, whether by time-tabling them to difficult classes, subjecting them to intimidation and bullying by the school administration, or other methods.

At present, teachers identified as “experiencing difficulty” cannot be dismissed unless they fail a ten-week “Teacher Improvement Plan”. Under the union’s scheme, a special task force would provide principals with resources, advice and support to utilise this program as a means of removing those deemed “poor”.

The NSWTF proposal follows a blueprint unveiled by the Victorian state Labor government earlier this year in which “strike teams” of ex-principals and leading teachers inspect schools for “evidence of improvement,” with failure possibly leading to teachers and principals being asked to “move on”.

The unions are now embracing an agenda long espoused by right-wing think tanks: blaming individual teachers and schools for “poor school performance,” instead of the chronic under-resourcing that is the primary cause of the difficulties that teachers and students face, particularly in working class areas.



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