Gillard's National Press Club speech

Australia: Labor's war on public education

Laura Tiernan
8 March 2010

Less than one month after the Rudd government's *My School* web site was launched, ushering in school league tables and a punitive regime of high-stakes testing, Education Minister Julia Gillard unveiled a further raft of pro-market education reforms. Gillard's address to the National Press Club on February 24 pledged a new wave of attacks by Labor on public education.

The measures outlined in Gillard's speech, including a uniform national curriculum, teacher performance guidelines, student ID numbers, the return of school inspectors, and the "reform" of teacher training, constitute a declaration of war on the teaching profession.

Gillard, who is also Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, and Deputy Prime Minister, used her speech to proclaim the introduction of Labor's *My School* a success. She boasted that the web site, which ranks schools on the basis of standardised NAPLAN literacy and numeracy tests—publicly naming and shaming schools that "underperform"—was "a landmark in Australian education reform".

Her speech was immediately welcomed in corporate and media circles. The Melbourne *Age* editorialised that Rudd and Gillard's "education revolution" was shaping up as a "lasting reform," akin to federal Labor's deregulation of labour markets and the financial system during the 1980s, and the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax by the Howard government in July 2000.

The *Sydney Morning Herald's* Miranda Devine, a purveyor of every politically retrograde sentiment, including support for the US-backed wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and anti-Muslim racism, was equally effusive: "The Deputy Prime Minister spoke so much sense in her speech, and answered questions with such verve and wit, that reporters leaving the Press Club could do little more than shake their heads in admiration." Devine praised Gillard for "[t]humbing her nose at the worst of teacher unions' ideological intransigence" and noted: "Gillard, who is from the Left, fearlessly takes on their sacred cows."

The media and political establishment has closed ranks behind Gillard's education reforms because they are the spearhead for a major new offensive being demanded by business against every section of the working class. On March 3, Labor announced plans for *My University* and *My Hospital* that will publicly rank health and tertiary education providers on the basis of "efficient service delivery". Like *My School*, the hospital and university web sites will be used to slash costs and target the jobs and conditions of public sector employees.

Significantly, in the United States, the Obama administration is using school report cards and crude teacher performance measures to sack teaching staffs and close schools in a manner similar to Reagan's infamous firing of the PATCO air-traffic controllers in 1981. Obama is seizing on the global financial crisis to effect a major restructuring of class relations in the interests of the financial oligarchy. Similar measures are being brought forward in every country, including Australia.

Indeed, in her speech, Gillard began targeting "underperforming" schools. She identified "some 12 percent of schools" which had "70 percent or more of their literacy and numeracy results below or substantially below the average of their statistically similar schools." As the next round of NAPLAN tests becomes available, and is published on *My School*, the results will be used to victimise teachers and entire schools.

While Devine speaks of Gillard's confident—indeed gloating—performance at the National Press Club, Labor's "success" in enforcing *My School* rests entirely on the support of the teacher unions. Far from the Australian Education Union (AEU) and its state affiliates showing "ideological intransigence," they have rammed through the government's agenda, suppressing all opposition, debate and discussion among teachers.

The AEU ensured the introduction of NAPLAN tests, opposing calls from teachers for a national boycott. Their complicity has paved the way for Labor's second wave program that will usher in a frontal assault on teachers' conditions and the commodification of every aspect of education.

The second wave agenda

In her National Press Club address, Gillard gave voice to a seismic shift by Labor in education policy. "For too long we have let children down," she intoned. "Let them down by allowing school reform in this country be distracted by an ideological debate about competition between sectors…"

According to Gillard's warped logic, those who defend public education and oppose the shift of government funds to the private

© World Socialist Web Site

sector are "letting children down". Labor is actively jettisoning any defence of public education.

Gillard made entirely unsubstantiated, and frankly ludicrous, allegations against teachers. Students' education, she claimed, was being "stymied by the orthodoxy that what teachers did in the classroom was largely up to them and that external scrutiny and accountability for students was somehow not appropriate".

In fact, classroom practice has never been determined autocratically by individual teachers. It has been framed by publicly available curricula and syllabus, developed and assessed by educational experts. It is this very notion of professional expertise to which Gillard objects. Labor's "education revolution" is based on corporate notions of "efficiency," with students regarded as raw "inputs" to which teachers must simply "value add," according to the needs of business.

Labor's second wave of reforms will drive this process. Its centrepiece is a new national curriculum for English, maths, science and history, set to commence at the start of next year. Flagged during her National Press Club address and unveiled by Gillard last Monday, it will govern every aspect of teaching from kindergarten through to Year 12. Its aim is fourfold: to ensure a "work-ready" labour force via emphasis on the "three Rs" (reading, writing and arithmetic); to erect a further benchmark against which teacher performance will be measured; to stifle independent critical thought among teachers and students; and to slash costs.

In tandem with compulsory NAPLAN tests and *My School*, the new national curriculum—a pet project of the former Howard government—will allow the government to monitor teachers and will narrow the quality and content of education. Teachers' knowledge, flexibility, creativity and skills will be sidelined. As Murdoch's March 1 *Australian* editorial noted: "[T]he guidelines are sufficiently prescriptive to avoid classes becoming diverted by tangents and teachers' pet ideas."

The thrust of Labor's reforms, including the return of school inspectors, marks a historical regression. Major industrial struggles led to the abolition of inspectors in the 1970s. Their return will be used to discipline "underperforming" schools and to pinpoint teachers who do not follow Labor's national curriculum to the letter. Gillard's new teacher "standards" will do likewise, facilitating performance pay, generating competition within schools and undercutting the collegiality that is so central to the profession of teaching. The introduction of student identity numbers, with its Orwellian undertones, epitomises the business-driven character of Labor's reforms. ID numbers will be used to link students' educational problems to specific teachers and schools and scapegoat the latter for the worsening social inequalities produced by capitalism.

Concern and opposition among teachers and parents is growing, but can find no outlet through the official political establishment. The unions support Labor's agenda. Their only disagreement is that Rudd and Gillard are failing to adequately "consult". The unions want to be given due recognition for policing Labor's policies against teachers.

Under these conditions the role being played by the various petty-bourgeois tendencies (Socialist Alliance, Socialist Alternative and Solidarity) is critical. They are working to boost the credentials of the AEU. According to Socialist Alternative's Tess Lee Ack, the AEU is preparing to lead a national boycott against the next round of NAPLAN tests that are due in May. The AEU is preparing nothing of the sort. Its bogus resolution, adopted at the AEU's national conference in January, was aimed solely at heading-off growing anger among teachers toward Labor's plans.

Lee Ack claims: "So the scene is set for a confrontation." And the site of this "confrontation"? "The AEU executive will meet on 12 April to decide whether the boycott will go ahead". In the meantime, advises Socialist Alternative, teachers should "familiarise themselves with the arguments against league tables" by… visiting the AEU web site, to which it provides a link. This is a recipe for preventing independent action by teachers and subordinating them to the very union organisations that are enforcing Rudd's agenda.

In 2007 Socialist Alternative and the entire middle class ex-left called for a Labor vote, claiming that a Rudd government would represent a "lesser evil" to the Liberals. According to the AEU, Labor's election presented "an opportunity for a change in policy direction following more than a decade of systematic attack on public education and training". Far from inaugurating a change in "policy direction," Labor is enforcing a new wave of free-market reform, following on from those of the Hawke-Keating governments between 1983 and 1996. The chief role of groups like Socialist Alternative is to bolster the trade union bureaucracy and prevent a conscious political break by working people from Labor.

Gillard's National Press Club address raises the urgent necessity for teachers and parents to strike out on a new political road. In opposition to Labor's "education revolution," which divides parents against teachers, and school against school, independent action committees should be established to unite teachers, parents and students and map out a political and industrial counter-offensive that reaches out for support from every section of the working class. Labor's pro-market agenda must be met by a mass socialist movement that will transform society from top to bottom. Such a struggle will make available the enormous wealth, technology and resources of society to provide a high quality education for all.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site