

Australian teachers' union makes empty threat to boycott NAPLAN testing

Laura Tiernan
14 April 2010

The Australian Education Union (AEU) national executive on Monday voted to impose a moratorium on the federal government's National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) exams scheduled for May 11-13. The ban, however, is a hollow threat. The union has already made clear that it accepts the entire framework of Labor's pro-market education reforms, including the compulsory student tests that are used to rank schools.

Less than an hour later, education minister and deputy prime minister Julia Gillard responded by again declaring that she would call on parents to help administer the NAPLAN tests if teachers proceeded with the national boycott. Gillard also warned that teachers who refuse to supervise the exams face heavy fines under state industrial laws.

Already, in New South Wales, Labor's education minister Verity Firth has applied to the Industrial Relations Commission that a hearing be listed before Friday in a bid to outlaw any boycott.

Labor's NAPLAN tests have been widely condemned by teachers and educational experts because they have little educational value and are utilised to name and shame "underperforming" schools. The tests feed into the government's recently launched *My School* web site, which is effectively a government-sanctioned "league table", pitting school against school, both nationally and across hundreds of local school areas.

In Britain and the United States, similar high-stakes testing procedures have been adopted to victimise and sack teachers, subordinate curricula to the productivity requirements of business and close hundreds of public schools.

In a statement Monday, AEU federal president Angelo Gavrielatos made clear the boycott motion would not launch a campaign among teachers. Gavrielatos said it was "disappointing that the federal government had so far rejected the AEU's plan to stop league tables and improve the *My School* website so it would provide more accurate and comprehensive information to parents". The AEU's main concern is to pressure Gillard to the negotiating table to discuss an "improved" version of Labor's education measures that preserves their central thrust and that the union will enforce.

The AEU "plan" submitted to the Rudd government in March entitled *My School and League Tables: an AEU proposal* offered no principled objection to school league tables, only to the "misuse" of test data by tabloid newspapers and other media outlets. Not only does the AEU support Labor's *My School* web site, which is essentially a government-sanctioned league table, it has also recommended that additional comparative data be added tracking individual student performance with a graph that would "show the national average and the percentage of students above the average and the percentage below."

The AEU is incapable of mobilising teachers and parents for a national boycott of NAPLAN because the union agrees with its underlying rationale. The unstated premise of Labor's "school accountability" reforms is that individual schools and teachers are responsible for lifting student "performance," irrespective of the funding and resources available to them.

Results from the first round of NAPLAN tests published at the end of January demonstrated that schools serving disadvantaged communities overwhelmingly registered

lower test scores than their wealthier peers. The obvious response should be to increase government funding, resources and staffing to the public school system. But Labor's "education revolution" explicitly rejects such a perspective in favour of pro-market mantras about "choice", actively encouraging parents to pull their children out of "underperforming" schools and spurring a further shift to private education.

While it has adopted a boycott motion, the union has issued no call for meetings to organise such an action, merely leaving it up to individual schools and individual teachers.

As a result, the ground has been cleared for Labor to threaten teachers with the full force of the law if they refuse to administer the tests. At her Canberra press conference Monday, Gillard called on teachers to ensure that NAPLAN tests proceeded. "All options" were being canvassed she warned, declaring that industrial action by teachers would "not be protected" under state awards. "Fines and penalties will apply," she said.

One journalist asked: "Do you feel comfortable using parents as strike breakers?" Gillard promptly confirmed that she indeed felt "comfortable" calling on parents to administer NAPLAN tests.

Di Giblin, president of the NSW Parents and Citizens Association, said Gillard's comments were "irresponsible and divisive", adding: "Parents need to be able to play their role as an educational partner, not as a substitute for teachers."

Gillard's threats and her attempts to pit parents against teachers underscore the anti-democratic character of Labor's education reforms. They also point to the essential role of the so-called Labor "lefts" such as Gillard who are driving a new wave of free-market reforms on behalf of business that the previous Howard Coalition government proved incapable of implementing.

For all Labor's talk about offering "accountability" and "transparency", its testing and ranking regime is being rammed through against the wishes and democratic input of teachers and parents. A new survey published last week by the AEU shows that 88 percent of principals believe *My School* does not provide an accurate picture of school performance. More than 60 percent said public

comparison of test scores on the site would lead to greater "teaching to the test", with over 80 percent of those principals saying this would be to the detriment of other areas of the curriculum.

Gillard's claims that parents overwhelmingly support NAPLAN testing are equally self-serving. Her statement that "2.7 million parents have voted with their fingertips" in favour of *My School* is patently ludicrous as it equates a visit to the site with some kind of endorsement. In fact, according to an online survey of parents conducted by Interconsult for the AEU last month, 51 percent of parents said they would support a boycott of the NAPLAN tests.

In order to fight against Labor's *My School* ranking system, teachers need to launch a fight against the entire pro-market agenda that underpins Labor's education revolution. This means making a complete political break from the AEU which is working behind the scenes to reach a deal with Labor. In opposition to Labor's attempts to pit school against school and teachers against parents, teachers must establish their own independent action committees to organise a national boycott of NAPLAN and fight for a unified campaign of parents, teachers and students.

Standardised tests are just one piece of a broader agenda to slash spending to public education. These "reforms" cannot be fought in a piecemeal fashion, but must be rejected in toto. That raises the necessity of advancing a socialist program and the fight for a workers' government that would make tens of billions of dollars available to establish free, high quality education for all.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact