

# SEP public meetings oppose Australian government's assault on public education

Our reporters  
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Concerned teachers, parents, students, and working people participated in public meetings in Melbourne and Sydney this week called by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) to discuss the Rudd government's assault on public education through its *My School* web site that ranks schools based on their students' performance in standardised literacy and numeracy tests, known as NAPLAN (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy).

The meetings, held at Parramatta in Sydney last night and Dandenong in Melbourne on Tuesday, unanimously passed a resolution calling for the establishment of rank and file committees of teachers and parents in every school or district to plan a political and industrial campaign, independent of the trade unions, to oppose the government's entire "education revolution", including NAPLAN and *My School*.

The opening speakers at the meetings—in Melbourne, Dandenong High School teacher Ollie Gordon, and in Sydney, a second-year primary school teacher from a school in the city's south west—described what it is like to work in under-funded and under-resourced schools where many students come from immigrant families, including recent arrivals who have fled war and oppression. Gordon described how three schools—Dandenong High, Cleland Secondary College, and Doveton Secondary College—were starved of infrastructure development and basic maintenance for decades before being merged into a "super school" of about 2,000 students in 2007.

The two teachers exposed the fraud of Education Minister Julie Gillard's claims, which have been backed by the Australian Education Union (AEU), that NAPLAN testing is a valid diagnostic tool to help teachers and parents assess students' progress. They explained that the sole purpose of NAPLAN was to rank schools and teachers, who were now under enormous pressure to narrow the curricula and "teach to the tests," because the fate of their schools, and their own careers, depended on the results.

The speakers condemned the AEU for staging what amounted to a sham boycott of NAPLAN tests on the basis of appealing to Gillard to prevent the results being used for school "leagues tables", when *My School* itself was a giant league table. Gordon said NAPLAN and *My School* were also inseparable parts of an agenda to narrow education to rote learning and drilling in order to meet the demands of business for "economically productive" students—compliant and passive learners who would uncritically accept what they were being taught.

The second speakers at the meetings, Sue Phillips in Melbourne and Erika Zimmer in Sydney, both experienced teachers, drew out the necessity for a political break from the teachers' unions. They reviewed the unions' decades-long record of assisting governments, Labor and Liberal alike, to run down public education, boost private schools, break down teachers' conditions and move toward "pay for performance" for teachers.

Phillips and Zimmer emphasised that the teachers' unions, like the entire trade union movement, agree with the underlying bipartisan agenda of driving up productivity so that Australian capitalism can compete to attract globally-mobile capital, while slashing social spending and corporate taxes. They described how, in order to help make education an engine of "international competitiveness," the unions had repeatedly shut down industrial action by teachers, and bureaucratically blocked initiatives to unite teachers, parents and students to fight this agenda.

The final speakers, in Melbourne, Will Marshall, another long-standing high school teacher, and in Sydney, James Cogan, SEP national organiser, warned that the reactionary and destructive thrust of the Labor government's "education revolution" was demonstrated in the United States. There the Obama White House, deepening the attacks of the Bush administration, was supporting the sackings of tens of thousands of teachers and the closures of hundreds of schools. Budget cutting and high-stakes testing were

dovetailing to shut down supposedly poorly performing schools.

Cogan explained that while Australia did not yet have the same levels of government debt as in the US, Greece and other countries across Europe, where severe austerity measures were being imposed to pay for the economic breakdown that began in 2008 with the global financial crisis, the Rudd government's measures are part of a broader assault on education, health, welfare and other social spending. Governments around the world were in the same race to boost corporate profits and attract capital by slashing costs and producing the required workforces.

In order to fight this offensive, the speakers stressed, new organisations were needed, independent of the unions, guided by a clear political perspective: a socialist program to fundamentally restructure society on the basis of social need, not private profit, with a guarantee of free high-quality education for all. The speakers appealed for people to join and build the SEP to provide the required revolutionary socialist leadership of the working class.

Discussion followed on the SEP resolution. One of the important questions raised from the floor at the Sydney meeting was how to start such a fight at individual schools. The speakers and SEP supporters emphasised the need to develop the discussion and create committees where the growing opposition among dedicated teachers and worried parents can be given a clear political perspective, along the lines of the SEP resolution. In Melbourne, one question raised was what would happen in the event that teachers proceed to boycott NAPLAN in the face of legal rulings against such action. Speakers explained that the AEU was complicit in the antidemocratic legal sanctions that teachers were being threatened with, and that the trade unions functioned as the police agents for the Rudd government's draconian industrial relations regime.

At the Parramatta meeting, a casual high school teacher with 28 years' experience told the *World Socialist Web Site* that she had learned a great deal from the meeting about the agenda behind NAPLAN and *My School*. "I learned about what is happening in the US and UK, where schools are being closed down based on testing and ranking systems. *My School* has created a lot of anxiety among parents and students, as well as teachers. Parents, without fully understanding the way the test results are being used, are already thinking that they must take their kids to other suburbs with better performing schools.

"The NAPLAN results depend to a large extent on the backgrounds and socio-economic circumstances of the students. You can't expect the best results in poor areas.

There is a lot of stress for the students because of constant testing. The kids draw the conclusion that all that counts is what is assessed, so they are not interested in other broader information.

"I have noticed that over recent years as a casual teacher. If we try to broaden students' minds, they immediately ask if the material is being tested. I am concerned about the dumbing down of education, especially in areas like English and history."

David, a casual English teacher, said that the history of the unions' suppression of opposition to the pro-business restructuring of education was revealing. He said the government's agenda was to shift funding away from public education. "The government has no interest in educating the majority, who are heading towards low skill jobs ... It also wants less critical thinking, and no proper understanding of history.

"The attacks on education are also to direct funding to the financial sector ... The stimulus package has to be paid for. The privatisation of education is an enormous saving."

At the Dandenong meeting, Juan, a teachers' aide, said: "I've worked 10 years at my school. The conditions are disgraceful. The union has isolated everybody. I'm very concerned about what has happened. Some teachers end up with depression. The way things are, I feel they want to destroy the teachers. As one speaker said, for the government all education is about is generating profit. Education is to become a business. The schools have to become successful in the testing."

Juan commented on the international character of the political and economic crises. "Obama is like all new politicians—they always promise something but they never give it. Politicians make so many promises they know they won't achieve. There is great disillusionment with them, and great economic and social stress around the world."



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