

An exchange on NAPLAN and the role of Socialist Alliance

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On May 8, the *World Socialist Web Site* received an angry email from a supporter of the pseudo-left Socialist Alliance group, attacking an article that appeared on the WSWs under the headline “Australian teacher unions call off NAPLAN boycott”.

Socialist Alliance supporter LW was incensed by the WSWs report, firing off the following response: “Socialist Alliance does not support Naplan [sic]. Check out the badge boards. See Check [sic] the petitions we crclate [sic]. We will be there on Tuesday at the Demo. The badges say Naplan [sic] Sucks. Your lies about Soocialist [sic] Alliance suck too!”

LW’s email reveals extreme sensitivity over the Socialist Equality Party’s exposure of the trade unions and the ex-radical organisations that support them.

On May 6, the Australian Education Union (AEU) called off a nationwide teachers’ boycott of standardised literacy and numeracy tests (known as NAPLAN) scheduled for May 11-13. The union’s deal with the Rudd Labor government will see a joint “working party” enforce standardised testing and other sweeping pro-market measures.

The union’s deal paves the way for a far-reaching assault on public schools, as results from the “high-stakes” tests are used to sack “under-performing” teachers and privatise “failing” schools.

The WSWs report to which LW objected, published on May 7, stated: “The AEU’s sabotage of the NAPLAN boycott and its embrace of Labor’s new ‘working party’ demonstrates that in their struggle to defend public education, teachers are locked in a political struggle against the Rudd Labor government and its trade union

accomplices.”

The article continued: “It is precisely this conclusion that the various petty-bourgeois ex-left groups, such as Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative, have worked to prevent teachers from drawing. They have functioned as a direct appendage of the teacher union bureaucrats, blocking any struggle against Labor and bolstering the AEU’s fraudulent claims to be leading a campaign against league tables. In Victoria, the Teachers Alliance promoted the conception that Labor’s state Education Minister Bronwyn Pike was ‘sympathetic’ to teachers, even as Pike sought orders from Fair Work Australia to have the NAPLAN boycott outlawed.”

The SEP did not allege that “Socialist Alliance supports NAPLAN”, rather our article exposed the political chain of command: Labor’s right-wing education reforms, including NAPLAN, are supported by the unions and the unions are in turn defended by the various ex-radical groups, including Socialist Alliance. This chain of command forms a web of political relations aimed at suppressing any independent struggle by teachers and the working class as a whole.

While education minister Julia Gillard is being hailed as Australia’s “iron lady” for “staring down” teacher unions to enforce policies long championed by right-wing think-tanks, her alleged “strength” is illusory. It rests entirely on the trade unions, which have served to dissipate, divide and suppress opposition and concern among teachers, parents and students.

The Socialist Alliance group has played a pivotal role in this process.

On February 13, *Green Left Weekly’s* Pat Donohoe, a

Socialist Alliance activist and New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) councillor, extolled the election of “two new left candidates” —John Gauci and Lindy Nolan—to the executive of the NSWTF. Donohoe interviewed Gauci, a longtime Socialist Alliance supporter and contributor to *Green Left Weekly*, telling the newspaper, “Our election was the product of left collaboration” among “a range of socialist currents”. “[W]orking collectively,” he enthused, had won them “respect on council”.

The reason for this “respect”—i.e., from the trade union bureaucracy—would soon become clear.

On May 9, three days after NSWTF officials lifted the NAPLAN boycott, Socialist Alliance published an article in *Green Left Weekly* under the heading: “Teacher union caves in to Labor”. The purpose of the article, authored by Donohoe, was to provide a political cover for the NSWTF.

In the first place, the use of the term “cave in” was a complete misnomer because it implied that the teacher unions were initially engaged in a fight against the Labor government. In its submission to Education Minister Julia Gillard in March, the AEU explicitly endorsed both compulsory NAPLAN testing and the creation of nationwide performance rankings on Labor’s *My School* website. It accepted the entire framework of Labor’s right-wing school reforms, merely calling on Gillard to include the union in their implementation.

Socialist Alliance never once challenged the bogus character of the teacher unions’ boycott threat. And when, predictably, it was cancelled, Socialist Alliance rushed to provide a defence for the union’s actions: “New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) representatives on the AEU executive, who supported going ahead with the NAPLAN ban, were outvoted.” These “NSWTF representatives” were, according to Socialist Alliance, the helpless victims of “back-room collusion between other states and territories and the ALP”.

The argument could not have been more wretched. If industrial action is opposed by the unions, then it cannot proceed. In practice, a NAPLAN boycott was legitimate—according to Socialist Alliance—only to the extent that it remained subordinate to the AEU’s bid for a

deal with the Rudd government!

As for the “new left candidates” on the NSWTF executive? Not a word of public protest by Gauci or Nolan against the AEU-Labor government deal. No press release, no public statements, no newspaper articles, no meetings, no resolutions. Not a trace can be found of *any* attempt to launch a struggle among teachers against the union’s open sabotage of the NAPLAN boycott.

Rather, according to Socialist Alliance, the NSWTF “lefts” were to be congratulated for making a meaningless protest vote in support of a boycott while refusing to mobilise a single teacher against the union’s sellout deal (this despite their own admission that “the campaign against league tables was strong and growing”).

In an accompanying statement entitled “No league tables! No NAPLAN 2010!” Socialist Alliance complained that “the NAPLAN ban should have been maintained”. The statement uttered not a word of condemnation of the AEU or the NSWTF. Yet how was a NAPLAN boycott to proceed outside of a rebellion by teachers, parents and students against the union?

Socialist Alliance typifies the role of all the ex-radical groups. Despite their occasional anti-capitalist rhetoric, they are utterly hostile to *any* independent struggle by working people against the ALP and trade unions. They form the last line of defence—a shabby one at that—for an increasingly discredited Labor and union apparatus.

The author also recommends:

Australian teacher unions call off NAPLAN boycott
[7 May 2010]

SEP public meetings oppose Australian government’s assault on public education
[6 May 2010]



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact