

SEP candidate speaks on Gillard's education record

Carolyn Kennett
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The following is the edited text of the speech delivered by Socialist Equality Party candidate Carolyn Kennett to a public meeting held yesterday in her electorate of Reid in western Sydney. Kennett, who is a university lecturer, focussed on the record of Prime Minister Julia Gillard in undermining public education through Labor's so-called "education revolution". The meeting in Reid was the first in a series organised by the SEP prior to the August 21 election. Meeting details as well as extensive election coverage can be found [here](#).

I am very proud to be standing as the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for Reid. The SEP is the only party advancing a socialist program to defend the working class in opposition to the entire official political establishment—Labor, Liberal and Greens. As a university maths lecturer and a member of the SEP, I have campaigned among fellow teachers against Labor's assault on the public education system.

Over the past week and a half of this election campaign, the primary issue that has emerged in our discussions with workers at shopping centres, on doorknocks and workplaces is the anti-democratic ousting of Kevin Rudd and the installation of an unelected prime minister. There is enormous hostility toward this.

One of the key reasons that Julia Gillard was bureaucratically installed as prime minister last month is her previous record as Workplace Relations Minister and Minister of Education and Training. She demonstrated that she can ruthlessly prosecute the interests of big business.

As Workplace Relations Minister, Gillard oversaw the introduction of Labor's so-called the Fair Work laws, which retain all of the anti-strike provisions of Howard's WorkChoices. In the face of industrial action by construction workers at Westgate Bridge in Melbourne and Pluto construction workers in Western Australia she responded viciously. "Unlawful industrial action is wrong," Gillard declared earlier this year after Pluto gas project workers in the Pilbara struck in defence of their conditions. "People should expect to be punished; they should expect to feel the full force of the law; no apologies, no excuses, full stop."

As Minister for Education and Training, Gillard championed free-market policies throughout the education sector. Labor's "education

revolution" was driven by Gillard. Its purpose was not to improve education, but to usher in policies long championed by big business and right-wing think-tanks.

Labor's "education revolution" aims to privatise schools, TAFEs and universities and subordinate every aspect of education to the productivity and profit requirements of business. Gillard declared in her speech at the National Press Club in February that it was time to end the old-fashioned debate of public versus private schools. In other words, the concept that government should provide a universally-accessible public education system for all students, regardless of the income level of their parents, is really "old-school" and must be jettisoned.

In the leaders' debate last Sunday, Gillard and opposition leader Tony Abbott were asked if they agreed that "the courage to stand against the mob is a sign of a true leader".

Firstly, this question really sums up the attitude of the corporate controlled media to the electorate—ordinary people are "the mob"—it accurately captures the anti-democratic character of this entire election campaign.

In any case, neither Gillard nor Abbott objected to this term—far from it. Gillard boasted that she had dealt with "the mob" in pushing through policies aimed at undermining public education. "It wasn't easy staring down a strike by teachers," she declared. "I thought it was the right thing to do and I got it done".

The policies that Gillard described as "the right thing to do" include standardised literacy and numeracy tests (known as NAPLAN) which are used to compare and rank schools. These policies are opposed by the majority of the teaching profession, and that was why the union was forced to call a national boycott of the tests earlier this year.

When the boycott was announced on April 12, Gillard responded immediately with threats of massive fines against individual teachers under Labor's Fair Work laws. But that was not all. She also threatened that if teachers did not cancel their boycott she would call on parents to act as strike-breakers and supervise the NAPLAN tests. Not even Howard or Abbott would have dared to make such a threat. Gillard's statement aimed to pit parents against teachers and was condemned by the New South Wales Parents and Citizens Association.

The purpose of the NAPLAN tests and My School website is not to provide “transparency and information for mums and dads”, as the Labor government claims. Its real aim is to unleash a divisive struggle between schools.

In 2008, Rudd declared that Labor’s “education revolution” would create an “education market place”. But like any market place, there will be winners and losers. Schools that “underperform” in NAPLAN tests will face sanctions and closure, while teachers who fail to “value add” by lifting their students’ test scores will face intense pressure, and, ultimately, disciplinary action.

In Britain and the United States similar reforms have produced a disaster. They have been used to victimise and sack teachers, and close hundreds of public schools.

It is from right-wing commentators like Miranda Devine and Janet Albrechtson—both of whom were notorious cheerleaders for the Howard government and all its crimes, including the illegal invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan—that Gillard has won plaudits for pushing through Labor’s pro-business policies.

On February 25, Miranda Devine dedicated her entire column to a celebration of Julia Gillard’s National Press Club speech the previous day: “Unlike other politicians who make motherhood statements in an effort to be popular, Gillard, who is from the Left, fearlessly takes on their sacred cows,” she wrote.

Janet Albrechtson has been just as effusive. A February 3 column headlined: “Carry on with this revolution Julia” applauded Gillard’s actions against teachers and for “staring down their anti-reform agenda with aplomb. ...Good on her.”

Gillard has been hailed as Australia’s “iron lady” for “staring down” teacher unions. In reality, however, she was completely reliant on the unions to enforce Labor’s right-wing agenda against teachers. On May 7 the teacher unions called off the NAPLAN boycott by teachers, signing a deal with Gillard to ram through Labor’s pro-market reforms. Their deal meant that results from Labor’s “high-stakes” test regime will be used to sack “under-performing” teachers and privatise “failing” schools.

Just as former Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke recognised the vital importance of the unions’ collaboration when he established the Accord prior to the 1983 election, Gillard relied on the unions to implement Labor’s attacks on public education. Without the unions’ role in implementing and enforcing the attacks of the Hawke-Keating years under the auspices of the various Accords, award restructuring, Australian Reconstructed and enterprise bargaining, they could not have been carried through.

Labor’s Accord resulted in the destruction of the organised labour movement and the imposition of mass unemployment and poverty for the working class. Hundreds of thousands of jobs were destroyed. In the western suburbs of Sydney, whole areas have never recovered as hundreds of factories were closed down. In this electorate alone, factories like Hoover, National Can, Allied Feed, Union Carbide, Arnotts and others were destroyed and many of these workers never found jobs again.

The working class can only defend its interests by making a complete political break from Labor and the unions and taking up the fight for a socialist program.

Whether Gillard Labor or an Abbott-led Coalition comes to power, the next government will intensify this social and economic assault on the working class, in line with the austerity measures being implemented internationally.

Just this week it has been reported that Gillard opposed both the paid parental leave scheme and the pension increase when they were discussed in cabinet. This is despite the fact that she has been claiming these two measures as part of her credentials for re-election. When challenged in a press conference about whether the leaks were true, she declared: “I’m not a soft touch”. Any future spending decisions, she stated, would be made on the basis of “affordability” and “the national interest”. Her response should serve as a real warning to the working class.

The fight for a socialist program is an urgent necessity. The SEP insists that this program cannot be carried out through parliament, but only through the development of an independent mass political movement of the working class aimed at the complete reorganisation of society in the interests of the majority, not the wealthy few.

As with the Your Rights at Work campaign in 2007, the unions, including the teachers’ unions and the NTEU, are using all the resources at their disposal to fight for a Labor election win. This is echoed by all the pseudo-left organisations such as Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative who are also calling for a Labor vote on the basis that Labor is a so-called “lesser-evil” to the Liberals.

The SEP completely rejects these positions that are designed to trap workers within the confines of the parliamentary two-party system. As our statement concludes: The Socialist Equality Party urges the strongest vote for our candidates. But the central focus of our campaign is to present ideas and analyses, and to fight for a program. Our campaign is oriented beyond this election, because the working class must prepare for immense political struggles outside the stultifying framework of the two-party system and parliament, which cannot be pressured or reformed to meet its needs.”

I urge all workers and youth to give your support and active participation in the SEP’s 2010 election campaign, help to distribute our election material as widely as possible and to join and build the SEP as the new revolutionary leadership of the working class.

Click here for full coverage of the SEP 2010 election campaign

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