Australia: Gillard government steps up attack on public education, with NSW Labor's support

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The mark 2.0 version of the *My School* web site, launched on March 4, is yet another step in the Gillard Labor government's assault on public education. Endorsed by the New South Wales Labor government and all the other state governments, the new site ranks schools using data obtained from NAPLAN (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy)—the high stakes literacy and numeracy tests administered to students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9.

My School 2.0, like its predecessor, pits schools and teachers against each another, encouraging a further shift of students from public to private schools, and entrenching a two-tier education system, with many government schools left as nothing much more than underfunded safety nets. The site features an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage, based on financial data that each school provides, enabling so-called "like" schools to be compared. Schools in working class areas will be targeted for amalgamation or closure, and education reduced to "teaching to the test" in order to provide "job ready" graduates to cater for the needs of business.

Direct responsibility for *My School 2.0*—a modification of *My School*, which was initiated in 2010 and widely opposed by teachers, parents and educators—lies with the federal Australian Teachers Union (AEU) and its state counterparts.

In April 10, facing a teacher rebellion, the education unions announced a so-called boycott campaign, just one month before the first NAPLAN tests were to be administered. The boycott was a sham. The AEU refused to mobilise the many tens of thousands of teachers, parents and students who were opposed to the tests, in order to halt them, and then cynically used Labor government threats of hefty fines under its Fair Work Australia industrial legislation to call off the boycott.

The AEU bureaucracy—notwithstanding its "oppositional" posturing—never had any fundamental differences with NAPLAN or *My School*. Its concern was to ensure it remained a partner with the government in implementing its free-market, cost-cutting education agenda and as soon as then federal education minister Julia Gillard agreed to include the union in its *My School* working party, the boycott was dropped.

With the active participation of the union, *My School 2.0* now lays the conditions for even deeper attacks on public education. One of its new features, no doubt added by the AEU, is to require anyone who accesses the data to agree to a "terms of use policy" that forbids publication of school league tables.

The toothless nature of the provision was demonstrated when the *Sydney Morning Herald* and other newspapers around the country published the tables immediately after the new web site's launch, without suffering any penalty.

In order to cover its tracks, the AEU wrote to federal education minister Peter Garrett demanding he act against the newspapers. NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) president Bob Lipscombe feigned concern,

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and wrote to the state opposition parliamentary parties calling for discussions "with a view to both enforcing the NSW legislation against school league tables and implementing further measures to protect students, their schools and their communities."

Just like its boycott campaign, this charade is aimed at ensuring that the NSWTF's keeps its role as chief enforcer of government policy with whichever party wins the March 26 NSW state election.

The federal Labor government and its state counterparts fraudulently claim that *My School 2.0* provides "transparency". In reality, *My School 2.0* vastly underestimates the funds available to private schools and masks the ever-expanding class divide between public and private education. For example, the web site reports the exclusive Cranbrook College in Bellevue Hill in the exclusive eastern suburbs of Sydney having $29,258,591 in total net recurrent income, and spending $22,930 per student.

Cranbrook College has an investment portfolio of $87.7 million, which earned $3 million in 2009. It charges its year 12 students $25,503 each. In addition, it received $2.6 million in federal and state government funds, and an extra $3 million from Labor's "Building the Education Revolution." By contrast, the working class public Rooty Hill High School in western Sydney has $9,805,289 in total net recurrent income and spends $9,130 per student.

The NSW Keneally Labor government has marched lock step with both its federal and state counterparts, championing Canberra's free-market "Building the Education Revolution" and implementing NAPLAN tests throughout New South Wales. In January 2010, NSW Education Minister Verity Firth defended the publication of league tables and took out injunctions in an attempt to intimidate teachers from boycotting NAPLAN.

The state government has made clear it will deepen its attack on public school teachers by pitting teachers against each other through the establishment of 100 "Highly Accomplished Teacher" positions on higher pay rates.

Irrespective of whichever party is elected to government in NSW on March 26, such measures aimed against the right of all students to a high quality, public education will be stepped up. This is because all the major parties—Labor, Liberal, Nationals and the Greens—are committed to transforming every aspect of social life, including education, to directly serve the immediate profit requirements of big business and the financial markets.

This regressive agenda can only be defeated through the development of a mass movement of ordinary people—teachers, students and parents alike—entirely independent of the teacher unions and the Labor Party.

The Socialist Equality Party opposes the entire NAPLAN and *My School* agenda, and advocates instead tens of billions of dollars being poured into education to ensure free, well-staffed, high quality public education for all, from child care and kindergarten to tertiary.

Such a program cannot be implemented through parliament or by appeals to the powers-that-be, but only in the revolutionary struggle for a workers' government and the development of a social order that places every aspect of social and economic life under the democratic control of the working class. The SEP is intervening in the NSW elections to win workers, students and youth to this perspective.

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