

Australia: New South Wales teachers stop-work against devolution agenda

Our reporters
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New South Wales (NSW) teachers from 2,200 public schools across the state attended a two-hour stop-work meeting on May 18 over the Liberal-National state government's roll-out of its "Local Schools Local Decisions" (LSLD) policy, which devolves the power over hiring and other budgetary decisions to school principals.

LSLD is the NSW version of the federal Labor party government's "Empowering Local Schools" program. Prime Minister Julia Gillard and her education minister Peter Garrett intend all schools in Australia, public and private, to be "self-governing" by 2018. Some 1,000 schools, of which 331 are in NSW, have been selected for the first stage of implementing devolution. Garrett and state education minister Adrian Piccoli announced the 331 schools participating in NSW at a joint press conference on May 16.

Devolving powers to school principals is part of Labor's misnamed "education revolution", which has imposed the NAPLAN student performance testing regime and the publication of school ranking tables. After just several years of operation, Labor policies are widening the inequality between the provision of education to children whose parents can afford private school fees and the underfunded and substandard public schools available in working class areas. The "revolution" is based on right-wing, free market education models in the US and Britain that led to the establishment of the low-cost charter school systems, which are privately operated and generally exempt from a host of regulations, including those governing teachers' wages, conditions and qualifications.

Principal autonomy through LSLD and "Empowering Local Schools" is aimed at creating a similar system in Australia. It will end the current state-wide staffing formulae under which classroom teachers, executive and specialist teaching staff are funded by the state

government according to the number of student enrolments. Under LSLD, principals will instead control 70 percent of the allocated school budget. Costs will be cut by dismissing staff and employing less qualified and lower paid teachers, including casual teachers who can be dispensed with more easily.

Further cost-cutting will be achieved by tying teachers' pay rises, currently based on their years of experience, to meeting "standards" determined by the principal. The NSW director general of education, Michele Bruniges, boasted to the media that performance pay represented "a really big item, it's a big change."

Taken together the measures are an open assault on public education and overturn working conditions that teachers have had in the public school system for over half a century.

The response of the public school teachers' union, the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF), has been entirely duplicitous. Friday's two-hour meeting was the first called by the union since NSW premier Barry O'Farrell announced LSLD on March 11. The meeting was conducted as a pre-recorded vodcast at 130 different venues across the state so there could be no central debate and discussion by teachers on a unified response. The main aim was to block any discussion, including on the fact that principal autonomy is being implemented in NSW and most other states on the dictates of the Gillard Labor government.

The NSWTF speakers did not mention Labor or its education policies. Instead, union executives demagogically portrayed the LSLD initiative as a "radical agenda" for budget-cutting conceived of by the conservative Liberal Party. The bluster aside, the NSWTF is appealing to the O'Farrell government to consult with the union over the next six months on how LSLD is implemented.

The NSWTF's manoeuvring is just the latest act in its

decades-long betrayal of public education and teachers' working conditions, which has intensified since the coming to power of the federal Labor government in 2007.

In February 2009, the NSWTF called off a 48-hour strike against the first stage of principal autonomy, in which the then state Labor government was seeking to grant principals the power to hire teachers. The union then struck a deal that overturned centralised staffing. The result is that at least 70 percent of subsequent new teacher appointments have been made through principal hire.

In May 2010, under conditions in which the vast majority of teachers opposed NAPLAN, a national boycott of the performance testing scheme was called off by the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the NSWTF without any discussion or debate.

Moreover, while NSWTF president Maurie Mulheron attacked the state government over LSLD inside the May 18 meetings, outside he told the media: "We're not taking action over principals' autonomy, we believe that there should be more flexibility and autonomy. This is about a NSW government that's using that as a wolf in sheep's clothing to cut back on staffing formulae, remove specialist positions out of schools, deregulate class sizes and effectively casualise the teaching work force."

The attempt by the union to separate principal autonomy from cost-cutting is another cynical ploy to confuse and disorientate teachers. "Staff flexibility" is a codeword for deregulating class sizes and casualisation and is one of the main aims of Labor's "Empowering Local Schools" across the country. The teaching workforce at Technical and Further Education vocational institutions, which is also covered by NSWTF, has already been 70 percent casualised.

Teachers have repeatedly demonstrated their opposition to the undermining of public education and their working conditions. What is necessary, however, is the development of a political struggle against the Labor government and the state administrations, independent of the teaching unions. This was expressed most consciously at the May 18 meeting in Sydney's working class suburb of Parramatta, where Socialist Equality Party member and longstanding teacher Erika Laslett exposed the role of the union in facilitating the implementation of Labor's agenda and moved an alternate motion to the resolution of the NSWTF executive.

Laslett moved:

1. That this meeting rejects the entire education agenda of the Gillard Labor government, including NAPLAN

performance testing and principal autonomy as a fundamental attack on the public education system and the working conditions of teachers.

2. We call for the convening of unified mass meetings of teachers in Sydney and in the major regional centres so there can be a genuine debate on an industrial and political campaign against the Gillard government's policies, including the "Local Schools Local Decisions" scheme that the NSW Liberal government is implementing on federal Labor's behalf.

3. We call for the establishment of committees of teachers and parents in every school to fight for a nationwide boycott of NAPLAN tests and to defend the right of all young people to a free, high quality public education. This struggle will win powerful support among hundreds of thousands of workers and their families across NSW, Australia and internationally."

Laslett's motion was seconded by a casual teacher who told the meeting he supported it because both the federal Labor government and the state government were right-wing parties. As a casual, he said, he was already bearing the brunt of cost cutting, often only working one day out of five.

While only a small number of the audience voted for the motion in opposition to the union, the fact that half the Parramatta meeting abstained on the vote points to the growing suspicion and distrust in the NSWTF and deep concern over the future of education. Teachers who want to take forward a genuine fight to defend public education should contact the WSWs and the SEP.



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