

Teachers strike across Australia's largest state

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About 50,000 public school teachers in New South Wales (NSW) defied a strike ban by the state industrial court and stopped work for 24 hours on Wednesday. Thousands attended meetings called by the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) over the Local Schools Local Decisions (LSLD) blueprint being implemented by Premier Barry O'Farrell's state Liberal-National Party government. Teachers packed the Sydney Town Hall, with thousands more watching proceedings on video screens outside. Venues at 30 other suburban and regional centres were filled to capacity.

The turn-out of teachers, one of the largest since the late 1980s, underscored the depth of concern over the impact that LSLD will have on the education system and their working conditions. The plan will devolve power over most school financial decisions to principals, who will be responsible for determining their school's staffing, support services, equipment and supply purchases, maintenance and cleaning. In the neighbouring state of Victoria, local autonomy over hiring decisions, imposed during the 1990s, has led to 50 percent of new teachers being employed on temporary, casual or contract conditions as principals seek to control costs.

LSLD is part of the "Empowering Local Schools" program of the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard. Her government's objective is that every school in the country will be "self-managed" by 2018, facilitating major cuts in spending. After trials at a number of schools last year, a further 1,000 schools began "self-management" this year, including 331 in NSW. It is expected that as many as 8,000 permanent teaching jobs will be eliminated in the state when LSLD extends throughout the school system.

"Self-management" is one component of a national assault underway against public education, as both the

federal and state governments slash spending to meet corporate demands for the elimination of budget deficits. The Labor government imposed national student performance tests, known as NAPLAN, in 2009. Schools are now pitted against one another based on NAPLAN results, and teachers' pay and ranking will also be linked to them. Teachers, already under intense pressure to focus on "teaching to the test," will be compelled to operate with budgets that will not keep pace with inflation or enrolment increases.

Schools that "fail" the NAPLAN testing, or whose principals do not keep within budget, will be targeted for job cuts, amalgamation or closure. At the same time, teachers in every state are facing real wage cuts, school closures and other attacks on public education. Only three weeks ago, teachers struck in Victoria against a 2.5 percent cap on pay increases. Tasmanian teachers, parents and students have been battling closure plans. Thousands of teaching positions are threatened at vocational TAFE colleges, while academics and support staff are being retrenched at universities. Similar austerity offensives are being waged throughout the working class, in Australia and internationally, as the global economic crisis deepens.

The NSWTF leaders, well aware of the opposition growing among teachers, postured at Wednesday's meetings as strident defenders of the public education system. The primary aim of the meetings, however, was to confine teachers to impotent protests and token actions, confined to NSW. No union representative mentioned the national and international character of the assault on education, or the fact that the federal government is driving the "local schools" agenda.

The record shows that the NSWTF and the Australian Education Union (AEU), which covers teachers in other states, is collaborating closely with the Gillard

government. The unions betrayed the mass opposition to NAPLAN in 2010 by calling off moves toward a boycott of the testing regime. The NSWTF is no less willing to assist the introduction of local school management. As union president Maurie Mulheron told a union council meeting on June 2: “We’re not against principal autonomy.”

The official recommendation put to the meetings authorised the NSWTF to negotiate with the O’Farrell government, seeking a token “Putting Students First Charter”. The resolution contained vague threats of further action if the government refused to sign the charter, which would ostensibly commit it to making no cuts to education funding or teachers’ conditions until the next state election. Predictably, the government has rejected the charter, because reducing spending is the sole objective of the self-management regime.

Any negotiations with O’Farrell will be designed to find means to overcome the resistance of teachers and implement the demands of the federal and state governments. This is the role that the teachers unions played with NAPLAN, and every previous attack on teachers and public education.

Socialist Equality Party member Erika Laslett, a longstanding teacher, was alone in warning her fellow teachers that another sell-out of their interests was underway. Representatives of pseudo-left groups such as Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative raised no differences with the NSWTF.

Laslett spoke against the official recommendation and denounced the union’s cover-up of the central role of the Gillard government. She warned that “the NSWTF and the AEU have blocked any struggle against the attack on public education and are preparing to do the same again.” She drew attention to the international assault on the conditions and social rights of the working class, “to meet the demands of finance and big business for cuts to public spending and budget surpluses.” In the brief time she had to speak, Laslett reminded teachers of their experiences in 2010, when the union called off strike action against changes to staffing and shut down the opposition to NAPLAN.

Because of the anti-democratic manner in which the meeting was conducted, Laslett was prevented from moving a motion that advanced an independent political perspective for teachers, calling for the unity of all education workers, parents and students in

defence of public education. A similar motion was put by SEP members to a recent mass meeting of teachers in Victoria. The resolution provides the starting point for a rebellion against the NSWTF and AEU, and the development of an industrial and political campaign against the federal and state governments.

The following is the motion that Laslett sought to move:

1. That this meeting rejects the entire education agenda of the Gillard Labor government and the NSW state government, including NAPLAN performance testing and principal autonomy under “Local Schools Local Decisions”, as a fundamental attack on the public education system and the working conditions of teachers.

2. We demand smaller class sizes and permanency for all teachers, with an end to contract and casual positions. We call for a boycott of the Gillard government’s NAPLAN testing regime, which is based on free market models developed in the US and Britain that have led to the privatisation of entire areas of public education.

3. All education sectors in Australia are under attack. This meeting calls on teachers, education support staff, TAFE and university workers across the country to develop a joint struggle against the worsening conditions and job destruction being imposed by the federal and state governments.

4. We call for the establishment of rank-and-file action committees of teachers, education workers, students and parents in every school to plan out a coordinated industrial and political campaign to defend the right of all young people to a free, high quality public education.



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