

Australia: NSW teachers union paves way for assault on public education

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Correspondence between the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) and the state education department was made public last month, revealing that at least 10 temporary teachers had already replaced permanent teachers at an unnamed government school.

The letter, released at a union delegates' meeting, underscores the regressive nature of the "Local Schools Local Decisions" (LSLD) staffing agreement that the union signed with the state government last October. It has opened the door for the wholesale casualisation of teachers.

LSLD is the NSW version of the federal Labor government's "Empowering Local Schools" (ELS) program, which aims to make all public schools "self-governing" by 2018 in order to slash spending. The state Liberal government, like its counterparts around the country, is implementing Prime Minister Julia Gillard's agenda. NSW Education Minister Adrian Piccoli described it as "the most far reaching change in school education in NSW for over a century."

At the centre of the "school autonomy" plan is an attack on teacher tenure. LSLD has a three-to-five year timetable, during which the longstanding centralised staffing formula, which allocated staff according to the number of enrolments at a school, will be replaced by local staffing budgets. Instead of filling vacancies with permanently tenured teachers, school principals will determine a mix of permanent and temporary staff. LSLD's long-term goal is to replace large numbers of permanent teachers with lower-paid temporaries, employed on short-term contracts.

LSLD also mandates "pay for performance", scrapping teachers' salary progression according to years of experience. Conscious of the historic hostility of teachers to being paid according to so-called measures of student performance, it will be introduced

by stealth. Initially, pay rises will be tied to the acquisition of "professional standards".

In the name of making schools manage themselves, LSLD further sets out a timeframe for a "significantly smaller" education department head office, with schools tasked to "make most decisions".

The union signed off on a 2012-2016 staffing agreement with state government in the full knowledge that the government would proceed to give principals more power over staffing—as last month's revelations demonstrate. The education department refused to guarantee current school staffing entitlements, insisting that principals could determine the numbers of deputy principal, assistant principal, head teacher and specialist teaching positions within a school.

While the union claims that "a statewide staffing system will be retained," all the key elements of centralised staffing are being gutted. Since 2009, when the NSWTF signed off on a previous staffing deal, the proportion of teachers locally selected has doubled from 19 percent to 38 percent. Centralised teacher appointments are becoming limited to difficult-to-staff schools in rural, remote and working class areas.

Last year's staffing agreement allowed principals to make temporary appointments if a school's enrolments "have been or are projected to decline". For three decades, the underfunding of public schools has caused falling enrolments. In 1980, 22 percent of children attended fee-charging private schools nationally. Today the figure is over 34 percent, and has reached 45 percent in high schools in the state of Victoria.

In October, the union claimed a "win" for teachers—a joint NSWTF-government committee would monitor temporary appointments. The letter that surfaced last month revealed that no such committee exists.

Even if such a committee were convened, it would

only incorporate the NSWTF even more closely into the process of casualising the teaching service. Close to half the state's 50,000 full-time teachers will reach retirement age by 2016. In Victoria, where local autonomy was imposed two decades ago, 50 percent of new teachers are employed on a temporary basis.

Approximately 1,000 teachers a year in the NSW public school system are nominated by school principals as "excess" to their school's requirements. Most commonly, these nominations are officially justified on the grounds of declining student enrolments, but often they are a disciplinary tool. Up to now, teachers displaced from their school have had the highest priority, under the nominated transfer system, in securing a new vacant position. Last October's agreement allowed schools to choose not to employ a nominated transfer—a step toward forced redundancies of "excess" staff.

The union is nothing more than an adjunct of the federal and state governments' assault on public education. It has prevented teachers from fighting LSLD, just as it previously blocked any struggle against the Labor government's NAPLAN performance tests and school ranking system. After a 24-hour strike last June, when teachers defied a strike ban and rallied in large numbers at mass meetings, the union ruled out further industrial action against LSLD and confined teachers to impotent regional protests.

Predictably, the NSW government stepped up its offensive, launching a restructuring of the state and regional education offices. On top of the 5,000 public service jobs cut in the 2011 state budget, 200 jobs were eliminated from the education head office, the most severe job loss in its history. Last year's state budget inflicted a further 10,000 public service job cuts, including in education. In September, O'Farrell announced another \$1.7 billion cut to the education budget, \$1.6 billion from public education—the largest education cut in over 20 years.

Teachers in NSW and around the country need to take a stand. The Gillard government and all the state governments, both Labor and Liberal, are running down public education and actively seeking to expand the profit-driven, fee-paying private school sector. It is part of the austerity agenda being imposed in the US, throughout Europe and internationally to slash social spending and drive down the living standards of the

working class in the interests of the financial and corporate elite.

The defence of jobs, conditions and public education is impossible while teachers remain straitjacketed by the trade unions, which defend the profit system and its political representatives. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of action committees of teachers, parents and students, completely independent of the NSWTF. The way forward is a co-ordinated industrial and political campaign that links teachers across the country, based on the fight for a workers' government and socialist policies.



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