

West Australian government axes 500 education jobs

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In the midst of the federal election campaign, the state Liberal government in Western Australia this week announced that it would axe 500 jobs from public education, including classroom assistants, and freeze the hiring of teachers, setting the stage for larger class sizes and school closures.

Based on a new funding model that closely resembles the “Gonski” plan adopted by both the federal Labor government and the Liberal-National opposition, the cuts are a warning of what is to come nationally after the September 7 election, regardless of which parties form the next federal government.

The cuts to jobs and school services are part of a drastic slashing of social programs—in Western Australia and nationally—to make the working class and young people pay for the unravelling of the so-called mining boom and the deepening global economic breakdown.

Premier Colin Barnett’s state government will eliminate 200 education assistants’ jobs and remove 150 specialist education assistants employed to work, care and monitor students with anaphylaxis. A further 150 jobs will go from the 1,200-strong workforce at the education department’s head office in the state capital Perth and regional offices throughout the state.

Barnett foreshadowed closing high schools in the Perth metropolitan area, nominating Fremantle and Armadale as target areas for amalgamating schools. Education Minister Peter Collier admitted that class sizes would increase as a result of the staffing freeze, because of rising enrolments.

The loss of the education assistants’ jobs will add to the already heavy workloads of teachers and administrators, and endanger the lives of some students. Students who suffer from anaphylaxis are particularly vulnerable to serious allergic reactions that can be

caused by food allergies, medicines and insect stings. Education assistants are trained to monitor students and administer medical care if required.

Education assistant Kevin Davey, from Belridge Senior High School in Perth’s northern suburbs, told journalists: “You’re talking about children with autism, downs syndrome, kids who have severe anaphylactic shock, epilepsy, things like that where you need someone one on one with those kids to make sure they’re going to be okay.”

Vicki Bennie, who works at a language development centre as an education assistant, commented: “Most people think that we’re either a volunteer at school or a mum that comes into help but we’re actually trained; we have to have qualifications to do the job.” She emphasised “the impact on the teachers themselves,” who “would suddenly become so overwhelmed with all the work they have to do, the things we help them with.”

The education cuts follow last month’s state budget, which revealed a sharp turnaround in Western Australia’s economic fortunes after two decades of booming resources exports. Falling government revenues mean that Western Australia, previously the fastest growing state, will suffer a budget deficit next year. This underscores the depth of the gathering slump across the country.

The Barnett government earlier announced that it would scrap 1,200 public sector jobs and cap annual public sector pay rises at 2.5 percent—a real wage cut—in line with the federal and other state governments. It is further cutting \$150 million from as-yet unspecified social programs, and extending a 2 percent “efficiency dividend” across all government departments, affecting struggling public services such as health, education, child care and public housing. The August budget also

contained a raft of hikes in utility charges.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's Labor government immediately tried to politically exploit the Western Australian school cuts. Treasurer Chris Bowen stated that the cuts would not be good for students. "Only federal Labor has got a plan to provide extra funding into WA government schools," he said.

In reality, the WA measures are bound up with a new funding model that is similar to the Rudd government's "Better Schools" program, previously known as the Gonski plan. The Barnett government refused to sign up to the national scheme, but commissioned a review by a Melbourne university professor, Richard Teese, that made similar proposals to the Gonski panel.

Like the Gonski scheme, the Teese plan operates like a virtual voucher system and hands power to individual school principals to slash costs, including salaries. It allocates funding per enrolled student and gives schools a "one line" budget, with a salaries component and a cash component. Education minister Collier commented that "schools could 'buy back' education assistants but this would have to be funded by cuts in other areas of the school."

The trade unions that cover teachers and education assistants feigned outrage at the job cuts, but continue to promote Labor's "Better Schools" blueprint, which ties funding to similar "school autonomy" strictures, designed to impose budget austerity via "performance pay" and other cost-cutting measures, supervised by principals and pro-business school councils.

The unions also signaled their readiness to assist the state government to implement the required budget savings, and block opposition by education workers, parents and students. The State School Teachers Union of Western Australia, United Voice, which covers education assistants, and the Community and Public Sector Union/Civil Service Association, which covers departmental staff, called for meetings with the education minister and the department to outline what positions would be cut.

United Voice (UV) secretary Carolyn Smith told the media: "It is appalling that the Barnett government has decided to slash jobs in the face of record enrolments. Our schools are already under-resourced. Staff are already feeling the pressure. Cutting essential support staff is not going to make the situation any better."

Yet the unions are peddling Labor's "Better Schools"

program, which is designed to deliver the same kind of funding cutbacks, via the framework of "autonomy" and "performance pay" tied to narrow NAPLAN literacy and numeracy test results.

The federal Liberal Party's pledge to implement the "Better Schools" program if it wins office on September 7 confirms that both parties, along with the Greens, are committed to the same regressive agenda.



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