

Western Australia: Thousands protest against public education cuts

Our correspondents
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More than 20,000 public school teachers, education assistants, school cleaners, administrative staff, school gardeners, parents and students attended rallies across Western Australia last Thursday to voice their opposition to cuts to education jobs and funding by Premier Colin Barnett's state Liberal government.

In one of the largest protests held in Perth, the state capital, for more than a decade, an estimated 15,000 people attended the main rally at Gloucester Park. Thousands turned out in the southwest city of Bunbury and several hundred protested in towns across the state, including Broome, Karratha, Kalgoorlie and Geraldton. Some 62 schools were forced to close throughout the day.

Half-day stopwork meetings were called by the trade unions covering school teachers and workers—the State School Teachers Union (SSTU), the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and United Voice (UV)—following growing outrage among teachers, parents and students over the cuts.

Announced last month, the measures include eliminating the jobs of 200 education assistants, 150 specialist education assistants working with students with medical conditions and disabilities, and 150 backup staff in the education department. There is a freeze on the hiring of teachers, despite growing student numbers, which will lead to larger class sizes. Barnett also foreshadowed amalgamating high schools in the Perth metropolitan area.

The cuts are part of the slashing of social programs across the board in Western Australia (WA) and nationally to make the working class and young people pay for the unravelling of the mining boom in Australia and the deepening global economic breakdown.

The mining-dependent WA economy has suffered a dramatic reversal over the past 12 months, with

economic growth slumping from 14 percent in 2011–12 to 6 per cent in 2012–13, and expected to decline to around 2.5 percent by 2014–15.

State government debt is set to rise 30 percent over the next four years from its current level of \$21.9 billion, and debt servicing will rise steeply from last year's \$46.6 million to \$201.4 million in 2015–16.

The program of austerity will intensify following credit rating agency Standard and Poors' decision last week to downgrade the state's AAA credit rating because the Barnett government "lacked the political will" to deal with the ballooning debt.

However, the perspective advanced by the union leaders was to appeal to the government to recognise its "mistake" and reverse the cuts. CPSU branch assistant secretary Rikki Hendon said: "Today we send a message to the state government." Treasurer Troy Buswell and Education Minister Peter Collier have already stated that they have no intention of backing down, with Buswell declaring that the school cuts "will be a test of our political will."

The Barnett government is imposing a new funding model similar to the former federal Labor government's "Better Schools" program. Like Labor's scheme, it operates like a virtual voucher system and hands power to individual school principals to slash costs, including salaries. Collier told reporters last month that "schools could 'buy back' education assistants that lose their jobs in 2014 but this would have to be funded by cuts in other areas of the school."

At the Perth rally, the unions gave the platform to Labor state opposition leader Mark McGowan. He feigned concern over the cuts, but the measures are in line with the "Better Schools" program, which has been embraced by the incoming Abbott federal Liberal government. If McGowan were premier, he would be

imposing similar cutbacks.

As part of its annual budget, handed down in August, the state government announced a public school enrolment fee of \$4,000 per year per child for children of 457 skilled visa migrants. Following widespread anger and threats by affected families to reconsider living in Australia, the government modified the policy, delaying its introduction by a year to 2015 and charging only first children \$4,000 and subsequent children \$2,000.

Standard and Poors cited this revision, along with a back down on cutting payments to householders with solar panels feeding electricity into the power grid, as evidence that the government lacked the courage to implement the austerity measures demanded by the financial markets.

Education workers voted at the stopwork meetings to continue the limited industrial action proposed by the unions. While the government denounced the stoppages, it immediately convened talks with the union leaders, scheduled for today, to try to strike a deal.

The perspective of the unions is to block any independent mobilisation of education workers and other sections of workers against the dictates of finance capital. Their goal is to help impose these cuts, as their counterparts in other states and nationally have done, and channel opposition behind the re-election of state and federal Labor governments, which will only deepen the assault on living standards.



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