

Australian government-union conspiracy to sack “underperforming” teachers

Richard Phillips
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Teachers’ unions in New South Wales and Victoria have been actively working with education authorities and school principals over the past 18 months to fast-track the sacking of teachers accused of “inefficiency” or “underperformance.”

The process, which goes under the Orwellian designation of “teacher improvement,” was negotiated by the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) and the Australian Education Union (AEU) in Victoria and initially imposed on more than 120,000 teachers through enterprise agreements in 2013. Under these arrangements, public school teachers can be rapidly dismissed—within 12 weeks in NSW and 13 weeks in Victoria—if they fail to improve after being judged “inefficient” by principals or senior teachers.

During the 1960s and 70s, school teachers waged bitter struggles to defend their security of tenure and prevent victimisation by inspectors and education administrators. The unions have now torn up these hard-won gains by helping to devise, and now police, the new methods to discipline and sack numbers of teachers. The NSWTF and its Victorian counterpart cynically claim that the streamlined sacking processes represent a “gain” for their members. This is a patent lie.

Victoria’s dismissal procedures were developed in response to the former state Liberal government’s “New Directions” policy, which called for the removal of “the lowest performing 5 percent of teachers.” The NSW measures came after the NSWTF publicly demanded new processes to slash the time it took to dismiss “inefficient” teachers. NSW union officials began negotiations with the former state Labor government and finalised their so-called Teacher Improvement Program with the state Liberal government in December 2013.

NSW education minister Adrian Piccoli went out of his way to heap praise on the union for helping to halve the length of the disciplinary process and give “more

authority” to principals. “I would like to thank the NSW Teachers’ Federation for their cooperation during the negotiations,” he declared.

The following year, Piccoli said it was necessary to maintain an “unrelenting focus on the quality and capacity of our teaching workforce.” Improving teaching standards, he insisted, was the focus of the state government, “not dumping more teachers in the system.”

In other words, the government was intent on extracting increased productivity from already overworked teachers in seriously under-resourced state schools. Herein lies the purpose of the Teacher Improvement Program. Those who fail to submit, or attempt to resist these demands, which directly contradict and impede the development of enlightened and progressive educational methods, are to be disciplined or sacked.

Under the NSW agreement, all state school teachers must present an annual Performance and Development Plan (PDP) and participate in 100 hours of professional development every five years to retain their teaching accreditation.

According to the new guidelines, PDPs “must be constructed to align with policies, aims and strategic directions of the Department and school plan.” Teacher “inefficiency” is determined on the basis of these performance plans. This means no divergence will be tolerated from NAPLAN (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy), the notorious annual reading, writing, spelling and numeracy testing of students, upon which all schools and teachers throughout the country are constantly judged.

If teachers fail to reach the agreed targets and standards they can be placed on a 10-week program and subjected to intense and constant monitoring by principals or senior teachers. If they fail to “improve” during this period they face dismissal.

The union is completely integrated into the whole

procedure. It does not defend teachers but operates on behalf of the education department, steering individuals through the “improvement program” whilst attempting to sow the illusion of fairness to what is nothing but a kangaroo court proceeding.

A teacher has no rights within the process. If he or she disputes any aspect of the procedure they must raise their grievance with the principal and the NSWTF representative. If the union does not back the objection, it automatically fails.

If a local union representative endorses the objection and it is not resolved within three days of talks with the principal, the complaint moves to the education department’s deputy secretary of corporate services and the NSWTF general secretary. If the NSWTF general secretary does not support the teacher’s objection, it fails and the “improvement program” resumes.

If the teacher does not “improve” and is sacked, their only other option is to mount an unfair dismissal case in the NSW Industrial Relations Commission. But under conditions where the union has not backed his or her previous objections, the individual teacher would be forced to fund the legal action. In other words, the union, which helped devise the process, determines the fate of every objection and every teacher.

The most anti-democratic component of this Kafkaesque process is the stipulation that accused teachers cannot alert their fellow teachers, or anyone else, to the fact that they have been placed on the “improvement program.”

The procedure states: “It is the responsibility of all teachers involved to maintain confidentiality, to uphold the professional standing of individuals and ensure dignity and respect in the workplace.”

This claim is a total farce. The confidentiality requirement has nothing to do with “dignity and respect.” Its purpose is to isolate victimised teachers and prevent them from defending themselves by turning to their colleagues, throughout the state and nationally, and unifying in a fight against these oppressive measures.

A conspiracy of silence, in fact, surrounds every aspect of the Teacher Improvement Program. The education departments, along with the teacher unions, have provided little or no information about the number of teachers forced out or any details of their cases.

Contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site* last week, the NSW Teachers’ Federation refused to release any statistics on how many had been dismissed, let alone the numbers accused of “underperformance” or

“inefficiency.” NSWTF spokesman Cameron Malcher told the WSWs that the union “only deals with those that reach out for support and we are not prepared to give to you any information about this.”

The Victorian state government publishes no statistics on “underperformers” and the only figures available from the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education are from 2008 to 2014. Over that period, 72 NSW teachers were sacked, 12 of them in 2014, for being “inefficient” and placed on the education department’s “not to be employed” list.

Anecdotal evidence indicates, however, that the number of teachers dismissed for “inefficiency” or pushed into “performance management processes” has increased since the current enterprise agreements were imposed.

The witch-hunting of state-school teachers is an integral part of an ongoing campaign by federal and state governments—Liberal-National and Labor alike—to slash public education spending and undermine teachers’ working conditions. The result has been larger classes, longer hours and a growing mountain of paperwork associated with NAPLAN testing and other data collection systems.

The defence of victimised teachers can only be challenged as part of a unified struggle of teachers, students and parents in a political rebellion against the teacher unions, which function as the industrial police force for both state and federal governments. A necessary step in this process is for teachers to begin speaking out.

The WSWs urges teachers throughout Australia, including those who have been accused of “underperformance,” to contact the Socialist Equality Party in order to open up a discussion on how to develop a unified fight against the ever-escalating assault on teachers, students and public education as a whole.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact