Australia: Labor Party, teacher unions prepare further assault on public education

Patrick Kelly, Frank Gaglioti
9 March 2016

Australian Labor Party leader Bill Shorten earlier this year unveiled a new school funding plan, "Your Child, Our Future," based on the former Labor government's "Gonski" model.

Shorten boasted that Labor will increase school spending by $37 billion over the next decade if it wins the federal election due later this year, representing "the most significant improvement in schools education in Australia for two generations." The Australian Education Union (AEU) has enthusiastically endorsed the policy, and is preparing a $2 million "pro-Gonski" television advertising campaign while also organising teachers to door-knock for Labor in 18 marginal electorates across the country.

The Labor Party and teacher unions' campaign is a fraud from start to finish.

The proposed funding increase—itself grossly inadequate compared to the real needs of a crisis-stricken public school system—is so much hot air in an era of bipartisan commitment to austerity spending cuts. Shorten has been careful to allow himself ample room for manoeuvre. Of the headline $37 billion spending figure promoted by Labor and the unions, just $700 million (less than 2 percent) has been allocated for the first two years of a potential three-year Labor government. In 2018 and 2019, another $4.5 billion will supposedly be allocated, with the remainder of the $37 billion spread annually up to the year 2025.

While significant school funding increases will remain a mirage on a distant horizon in the event that Labor wins the next election, a series of reactionary measures will be immediately enacted, attacking teachers' job security and undermining the public education system.

Labor's funding policy states that the promised additional money "is not a blank cheque—it comes with strict obligations and benchmarks on systems, schools and teachers … school funding is an investment, and we want to see the best possible return for every student, and as a country."

Labor's shadow education minister Kate Ellis accused the Liberal-National coalition government of believing in "no strings attached funding to our schools—that will not continue under Labor." She added: "This is about restoring accountability and transparency… What we need to do is invest in evidence based policies, spend more money on the programs which we know make a difference and stop spending money on those that don't."

Ellis' comments are code for an extension of the US-style assault on the public education system that lay at the very heart of the former Rudd and Gillard Labor governments' "education revolution." At the same time as she and Shorten are attempting to win public support by promising school funding increases, behind the scenes they aim to win the backing of the corporate elite by promising to accelerate that agenda.

Gillard, with the collaboration of the Australian Education Union, introduced NAPLAN (the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy), the country's first national standardised testing system.

As intended by its designers, NAPLAN has been the key mechanism for accelerating the shift of students from the public school system to the private. More than 40 percent of secondary students now attend private schools. The proportion of students in the private sector was already steadily ratcheting higher in the last four decades—following the Whitlam Labor government's decision to funnel federal public funding to Catholic and other private schools—with total primary and secondary students in the private sector increasing from just over 20 percent in 1970, to 28 percent in 1990, 31 percent in 2000, and 34.5 percent in 2010. As well as speeding up this trend, the NAPLAN standardised testing regime has narrowed the curriculum, promoted regressive "drill and kill" teaching practices, allowed the targeting of so-called

© World Socialist Web Site

underperforming public schools for closure or amalgamation, and has been used to victimise and sack teachers targeted for alleged underperformance.

These processes will drastically worsen under a Shorten Labor government.

Shorten and Ellis refer to “benchmarks,” “returns on investment,” and “evidence based policies”—terminology that is drawn from the corporate world, reflecting the underlying agenda behind the assault on public education. The entire school system, instead of being oriented towards children’s intellectual, cultural and creative development, is being more and more closely geared to the immediate demands of big business and finance capital. The Labor Party’s education “benchmarks” for students and teachers are all based on the premise that NAPLAN and other standardised test scores are the arbiters of school and student success.

All of Labor and the AEU’s claims that the Gonski funding model was aimed at boosting education funding to meet student need and achieve an equitable school system have proven to be entirely false.

The agenda was always to undermine the public education system in the guise of “accountability” and “transparency.” In 2011, three years after introducing NAPLAN, the former Labor government commissioned a report into school funding, carried out by the chairman of the Australian stock exchange David Gonski. Not only did the Gonski report ensure that Australia would remain one of the few advanced capitalist countries that publicly funds private schools, Gillard responded to the paper by insisting that private schools would never have a cent of their government funding cut under Labor. This entrenched the lavish public funding of the wealthiest elite schools that the previous Howard Liberal-National coalition government had extended, and at the same time underscored the lie of Labor’s claim to be allocating school spending based on student need.

A stark class divide wracks the Australian education system. According to figures published by the Save Our Schools organisation, between 2009 and 2014, public school funding per student fell by 3 percent while private school funding increased by 10 percent. In some schools the disparity over this period was even greater. In Melbourne’s Korowa Anglican Girls School, for example, where families pay up to $32,000 a year for tuition, government funding increased by 38 percent. At the same time, government funding was slashed by 18 percent for students in the working-class public school of Corio’s North Bay P-12 College.

Shorten has now declared that every school will receive more funding under a future Labor government and has boasted of the support expressed for his policy by the Catholic and independent school lobby groups. No faction of the Labor Party has any problem with funnelling vast public funds to elite private schools, or to Catholic and other religious institutions, in blatant violation of the basic democratic precept of the separation of church and state.

Under the previous Gillard Labor government, the additional allocated school funding amounted to $14.5 billion over six years, a fraction of the extra $6.5 billion per year recommended in the Gonski report. Most of this was allocated to the final two-year period, in other words, it was left to be cut by Gillard’s successor while the initial investments were financed via multi-billion dollar cuts to the university sector. In addition, Gillard tied school funding to numerous conditions that included the implementation of so-called school improvement schemes and annual teacher “performance reviews” that have confronted public school teachers targeted for removal with Orwellian administrative sanctions carried out by principals and AEU bureaucrats working in tandem.

Kate Ellis’s recent accusations that the Liberal-National coalition government has been allowing “no strings attached” funding leaves no doubt that a future Labor administration’s measures would be even tougher.

The teachers’ unions have functioned as the enthusiastic enforcers of this agenda, under Gillard and now under Turnbull and will continue their role if Labor wins the forthcoming federal election. Shorten addressed the AEU’s federal conference on February 26 and declared that “when we talk about education policy we do not sneer about the role of the union in helping us form good policy.” These remarks underscore the fact that ordinary teachers cannot take a single step forward in defence of the public education system—and the rights of teachers, parents and students alike—without taking up a fight independently of, and in opposition to, the entire political establishment and its trade union accomplices.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site