

Australia: NSW Teachers Federation holds stop work meetings across the state

Demand the right to read the agreement before voting on it! Abolish NAPLAN, TIP, inspectors and other regressive measures!

The Socialist Equality Party
7 December 2016

This stop work meeting is being held in flagrant violation of teachers' democratic rights. While New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) bureaucrats and the Department of Education and Communities (DEC) know what is in the latest Salaries and Conditions agreement, teachers, who will have to work under its provisions for the next three years, have been kept in the dark. In its arrogance, the union has decided to tell us only what it thinks we should know. Why? Because they are well aware that if we were fully informed, we wouldn't vote for it.

The Socialist Equality Party calls all NSW public school teachers present to move and back procedural motions demanding that the full 2017–2019 Salaries and Conditions agreement be circulated well in advance of any vote.

The meeting should reject the agreement on principle. All teachers need time to read and discuss the document with rank-and-file colleagues, independently of the union. We insist that the NSWTF immediately posts it on-line and delays the vote until at least December 15.

Given the NSWTF's past betrayals, which have resulted in the transformation of public education into a system based on intimidation and threats, producing fear, anxiety and unprecedented levels of stress among students, teachers and parents alike, teachers should carefully scrutinise every word.

Referring to the 2014–2016 salaries agreement, which teachers were called to vote on in 2014 before reading the full document, president Maurie Mulheron claimed at the time, "There's been no concessions, there's been nothing given up."

Yet, that deal with the Department of Education (DoE) introduced a streamlined process for sacking teachers—the misnamed Teacher Improvement Program (TIP), in which "underperforming" teachers can be summarily dismissed in as little as 10 weeks; they are bound to an extraordinary confidentiality requirement, and accorded no right of appeal. The 2014–2016 salaries agreement also replaced the long standing incremental pay scale—under which teachers were paid according to years of experience—with a "standards-based" pay, a veiled step towards making teachers' income dependent on student test results.

Rank-and-file teachers were not even given the opportunity to

vote on the 2016–2020 Staffing agreement in December 2015. It was cobbled together by the union and DoE, with no input from teachers, and simply rubber-stamped by the union's 300-member council over the summer school holidays. That staffing agreement, described by the union as "a significant achievement," which had secured "major gains," expanded the powers of principals to hire temporary teachers. It also allowed the education department to identify up to eight schools in which *all* (not just alternate) permanent teacher vacancies could be chosen by the principal.

Over the past six months, the Baird state government has escalated the damaging effects of NAPLAN (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy) with *Stronger HSC Standards* and *Bump It Up*, and reintroduced inspectors in schools for the first time since the 1970s. Neither of these measures has been put to mass meetings or a vote.

Without any consultation with its members, the union has worked closely with the government on *Stronger HSC Standards*, which requires Year 9 students to achieve a high Band 8 in their NAPLAN tests to be eligible for the HSC, thereby marginalising the state's most disadvantaged students. And for its services to the Baird government's agenda, the NSWTF was rewarded with one of the 6 "core" seats on the new Education Standards Authority, to replace BOSTES (Board of Studies Teaching and Educational Standards) in 2017.

As far back as 2009, the teacher unions called for the re-introduction of school inspectors, after these had been eliminated altogether from public schools in the 1970s, in the wake of major strikes and walkouts by teachers. In its coverage of the Australian Education Union's (AEU's) call, which the union again initiated without any input from its members, the Murdoch press reported, under the headline "Bring back school inspectors, says national teachers' union," that the AEU had called for a "charter of school accountability," containing "10 principles."

"Schools have much to learn from external review," Angelo Gavrielatos, then president of the federal AEU, declared.

In October this year, legislation authorising spot checks (i.e., "external reviews") was passed in the NSW parliament, handing over to school inspectors the power to deregister and close public schools and to dismiss "underperforming" teachers. Inspections

can now be triggered by parent complaints, a turnover of senior staff or by poor academic results, paving the way for teachers to be blamed, punished and sacked.

As for the regressive *Bump It Up* program, the NSWTF is now complaining that it was not consulted. That is hard to believe. The program's goal is to massively intensify standardised testing, in which the union has a significant vested interest. In 2010, it called off a national teacher boycott of NAPLAN after being invited into a working party with the Gillard Labor government to implement the testing regime. Does any teacher seriously believe the NSWTF will oppose *Bump It Up* once it is sitting at the government's table?

In any event, on September 2 NSWTF general secretary John Dixon wrote to Mark Scott, Secretary of the NSW Department of Education, making clear the union's support. He wrote, "Whilst generally supportive of the aims of the *Bump It Up* strategy, Federation believes the lack of prior consultation with the union representing the teachers, executives and principals responsible for implementing the strategy, is unacceptable."

Given the ongoing failure of the union to organise "prior consultations" with teachers regarding the current agreement, its hypocrisy is breathtaking.

Teachers need to take stock of the rapid deterioration in public education over the past seven years and probe the reasons why it is happening. The underlying rationale has been to hand public schools over to private management, and then to privatise them completely. This agenda of government cost-cutting was spearheaded by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments when they introduced NAPLAN and the *My School* website in 2009 and 2010, modelled on similar measures introduced in the US and the UK, with equally disastrous results.

Earlier this year, the Conservative British government released a white paper on education calling for all government schools to be converted into academies, that is, into state-funded but privately-run schools, by 2022. In the US, 300,000 public school teachers and education workers have been sacked under the Obama administration, and entire school districts turned into charter (privately-run and, in many cases, for-profit) schools. President-elect Trump has recently appointed to the position of Education Secretary in his administration, Betsy DeVos, a billionaire donor to the Republican Party and an advocate of "vouchers," where parents are given a voucher, enabling them to take their child out of a public school and place them in a private one, thus subsidising the private system with public funds.

Numerous studies both in Australia and internationally document the negative effects of standardised testing on students and its role in undermining progressive theories of education. The real needs of students are ignored, while governments seize on "plateauing" and "declining" literacy and numeracy student scores to continually step up testing and impose ever more regressive teaching models onto schools, which bring with them an increasingly authoritarian climate.

For their part, the Australian teacher unions continue hailing the "Gonski" school-funding regime. The origins of the "Gonski" model, unveiled by former Labor Prime Minister Julie Gillard, lie in an inquiry commissioned by a former chairman of the

Australian Stock Exchange, David Gonski. It was always a fraud. The proposed spending—grossly inadequate compared to the real needs of the crisis-stricken public school system—was so much hot air. It was touted in an era of bipartisan commitment to austerity budget cuts and relegated to the distant future, while the model immediately imposed regressive measures undermining teachers' job security and professional autonomy, an aspect of Gonski that has been covered up by the teacher unions.

Unless teachers take a stand on this salaries and conditions agreement, they can expect further new regressive measures. What next, after NAPLAN, *My School*, *Bump It Up*, *Stronger HSC Standards*, Performance Development Plans, school inspectors, contract teachers, Local Schools, Local Decisions? The entire public education system, instead of being orientated towards children's needs, is being more and more closely geared to the demands of big business and finance capital.

Teachers have a critical role to play in defending the rights of students to a high quality, well-resourced and funded public education. The Socialist Equality Party insists that every child has a social right to a public education, from kindergarten to tertiary level, geared to their intellectual, cultural and creative development. But, like all the social rights of the working class—to a job, a liveable income and to free, high-quality health care, to a dignified and funded retirement—the right to education immediately conflicts with the agenda of the ultra-wealthy oligarchy that exercises dictatorship over economic and political life. The NSWTF has fully integrated itself into this agenda, operating as nothing less than an arm of government.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on teachers to begin to organise independent rank-and-file committees in all schools, made up of the most self-sacrificing and trusted teachers. Such committees should aim to unite with teachers throughout the state, nationally and internationally, on the basis of an anti-capitalist and socialist program, to end the subordination of education and all social needs to the profit interests of the banks and major corporations.



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