Australian media witch-hunts school principal removed for opposing anti-radicalisation program

Our reporters
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Over the past days, the corporate media has intensified its witch-hunt of a Sydney school principal and deputy principal, who were removed by the New South Wales (NSW) Education Department at the beginning of the month for allegedly opposing a government "anti-radicalisation" program which compels teachers to inform on their students.

Chris Griffiths, the former principal of Punchbowl Boys High School, a working class public school in Sydney's southwest, has been the subject of a stream of lurid reports in the Murdoch press and other media outlets. A host of articles have been published featuring entirely unsubstantiated claims that the school had become a bastion of Islamic radicalism, threatening so-called "Australian values."

At the same time, the politically-motivated character of the campaign has come into sharp focus. On Sunday, the *Daily Telegraph* reported that Rob Stokes, the state Liberal-National government's education minister, had instructed the Education Department to "take what action it felt necessary" before Griffiths' removal, effectively giving the go-ahead for the sackings.

Griffiths and his deputy Joumana Dennaoui had reportedly resisted the implementation of the state government's "School Community Working Together" program. Under the policy, introduced in 2016 alongside a federal "anti-radicalisation" plan, teachers and school staff are instructed to inform police of "anti-social and extremist behaviour" among students. Police were also reportedly seeking to attend Muslim prayer sessions at the school.

As the WSWS previously noted, the definition of "extremist behaviour" provided by "School Community Working Together" is so broad that it could cover any opposition to the status quo.

A report in the *Australian* last weekend underscored that the program is being used to provide the police and intelligence agencies with a vehicle to spy on working class students, in a bid to detect and stamp-out political dissent. The article stated that last year, the NSW Education Department "recruited" a "senior counter-terrorism officer from the NSW Police Force."

According to the *Australian*, the unnamed officer is tasked with establishing a "system to detect as early as possible schoolchildren vulnerable to radicalisation and to train staff to detect the early warning signs." In other words, the Orwellian program is targeted at students who are not yet "radicalised" and who are guilty of nothing more than having social and political opinions.

While the article does not spell it out, so-called "warnings signs" could presumably include expressions of opposition to Australia's role in the imperialist wars in Syria and Iraq, the sweeping attacks on democratic rights carried out under the rubric of the "war on terror" and the bipartisan assault on the living standards of the working class.

The article gave a sense of the scope of surveillance, with anonymous sources complaining to the *Australian* that only 34 of the 155 school prayer groups monitored by the police kept rigorous attendance records. Other reports have indicated that the "School Community Working Together" program has been rolled out at 19 schools in New South Wales, primarily in working class suburbs of western and south-western Sydney.

Robert Patruno, who was installed by the Education Department as the new principal at Punchbowl Boys High School, immediately gave assurances, in comments to the Murdoch press, that he would promote "Australian values"—a watchword for uncritical acceptance of the government-police agenda.

Patruno, who previously worked at a juvenile prison, indicated that he would welcome the police into the school, stating: "All I know is that I need to rebuild the relationship with Bankstown police. The police haven't been welcomed into the school." Patruno also posed for media photographs with Education Minister Rob Stokes and Education Department head Mark Scott.

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Patruno's comments come amid ongoing opposition from students, parents and teachers to the removal of Griffiths and the targeting of the school by the political establishment and the corporate press. The WSWS has been informed that senior teachers within the school opposed Griffiths removal.

Seeking to placate opposition, Stokes stated on the weekend that the government would "review" "School Community Working Together." He foreshadowed a major expansion of the initiative, however, declaring that in order to remove the "stigma" of the program, the government may roll it out at other schools.

Jihad Dib, state Labor MP in the seat of Lakemba, which encompasses Punchbowl, has publicly warned of the anger among local residents over the removal of Griffiths and called for a public forum. As principal of Punchbowl Boys High School until 2015, Dib collaborated closely with the police, including serving as an advisor to the NSW police commissioner, before being elevated in the Labor Party. Labor has played a central role in the attacks on democratic rights implemented on the bogus pretext of combating "terrorism" and in Australia's involvement in the US-led imperialist wars in the Middle-East.

According to the *Australian*, NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) president Maurie Mulheron privately "grilled" Mark Scott over the sacking of Griffiths and Dennaoui. The teachers union, however, has not expressed any public opposition to the removals. The NSWTF has previously indicated support for the government's anti-democratic agenda. Early last year, the ABC reported that Mulheron "said schools should be funded to deliver individually tailored counter-radicalisation programs."

Over the weekend, reporters from the WSWS spoke to a number of Punchbowl residents.

Linda, a single mother, commented: "Politicians are causing division between people. They should be uniting people, not dividing people like that."

Linda said that she had been targeted by management at her former workplace, which is heavily-surveilled by counter-terrorism authorities, because she is Muslim. "They were going to sack me, but I resigned before they had the chance," she said. "The grounds they gave me were that they didn't believe that I had completed a course, when I clearly had. It was just an excuse. Their attitude towards me changed once I started wearing a headscarf, there's no other worker there who wears it."

Mary, a working class mother, spoke-out against the media witch-hunt targeting Punchbowl High. "Everything was allegations," she said. "There wasn't anything concrete that was put forward. I've had family that worked for the school. I've had a lot of cousins, kids that we thought would never finish school, and they actually graduated under the principal who was sacked."

Mary denounced the "School Community Working Together" provisions targeting so-called "anti-social" behaviour. "Anything anyone disagrees on could be counted as 'anti,'" she noted. "Any time a kid shows disagreement they will be classified as 'anti.' Teachers aren't trained to find out who is 'anti,' they're trained to teach our children.

"When I first moved here from New Zealand, I thought it was a country of freedom where you can express your culture, your religion, without looking over your shoulder. Now the way it's going and what they're doing in the schools is taking away everyone's rights. What makes it worse is that they're targeting our kids. We teach our kids to speak up. Are we telling them that their opinions have less value?"

Mary expressed opposition to imperialist wars in the Middle-East, commenting: "Every single country that is being targeted has something the big countries want. At first I agreed with the wars when I was still at school. But I realised that the media aren't real journalists. They never show you the full story, they push the government's agenda. And with the principal at Punchbowl, they only showed one side."

Yasmine, a homemaker and mother of two in Punchbowl said: "It was only blown up into a massive thing because the principal wasn't co-operating with what the government wanted. It's disappointing. There should be some separation between what the government is doing and what the schools are doing.

"They want the police to go in and watch Muslim boys on Friday prayers, but they are not sitting there in Catholic scripture and listening to what they are saying. It is deliberately targeting the lowest on the food chain at the moment. Once you create that division, and you feed it, the bigger issues of war and unemployment don't get discussed."

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