

Free, high quality public education is a social right! Join the Committee For Public Education!

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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The Socialist Equality Party is establishing the Committee For Public Education (CFPE) to spearhead a political movement of teachers, Education Support staff, academics, students, parents, workers and young people in the fight for access to a free high-quality and secular public education system as a *social right* for all.

Over the past decade, federal and state governments have vastly accelerated their promotion and funding of private schools against public ones; imposed regressive teaching models via the NAPLAN (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy) standardised testing regime; slashed university and technical education funding; and prepared for a user-pays business model from kindergarten to the primary, secondary and tertiary levels.

If this corporate agenda is able to proceed, what little remains of public education will be effectively destroyed. That is why we call on parents, teachers, students and all working people to join the fight for public education and become actively involved in the work of the CFPE.

For over 30 years, the ruling elites internationally have been seeking to eliminate every previous gain won by the working class. The assault on public education is a central component of this social counter-revolution. The global education “market”—now estimated at more than \$4 trillion—is being carved up to provide new profit opportunities for giant transnational corporations. Public spending on schools and universities is regarded as an intolerable diversion of resources away from the pockets of the major financial institutions, big business and the ultra-rich.

In the US, 9,000 schools have been closed over the last decade and more than 300,000 teacher and education workers have lost their jobs. This year the Trump administration has announced cuts of \$9.2 billion, 13.5 percent of the Department of Education budget. The administration is accelerating the privatisation of public schools via vouchers (a “user-pays” system) and charter schools, including “for-profit” ones.

A similar process is underway in Britain, with budget cuts of £3 billion to be imposed over the next 4 years, amounting to an overall cut of 8 percent, the steepest since the 1970s.

These measures have charted the way for Labor and Liberal-National Coalition governments in Australia. Public education spending, for schools, universities and TAFEs (Technical and Further Education institutes), fell from 5.5 percent of GDP in 2010

to 5.2 percent in 2014, an effective cut of more than \$35 billion.

In 2012-13 the last Labor government slashed university funding by \$3 billion, while the current Liberal-National government is seeking to cut another \$2.8 billion. As for public TAFE colleges: in 2009 they taught 81 percent of vocational education students; by 2015 private operators had taken 50 percent of the market.

In fact, TAFE colleges have all but ceased to exist as public facilities. TAFE teachers, like academics and public school teachers, are invariably overworked, underpaid, and increasingly employed on insecure contracts, while students are treated as little more than cash cows, graduating either as full fee paying “clients” or with enormous tuition debts. In Victoria, the TAFE workforce has been cut by 44 percent, with similar cuts in other states.

At the same time, federal and state governments are continuing to plough public funds into the private (Catholic and “elite independent” or “corporate”) school systems, at the direct expense of public schools. The most recent figures reveal that between 2009 and 2014, the increase in per student funding for Catholic and independent schools was nearly three times the rate of inflation, while per student funding in public schools barely reached the inflation rate.

The “Gonski” school funding model, promoted since 2011 by the unions, the Greens and their pseudo-left acolytes, has locked in these lavish amounts under the fraudulent banner of “needs-based funding.” Numerous public schools, however, remain starved of resources. Students with special needs and disabilities are being left empty-handed, while overcrowding is rife. Between 2011 and 2016, the number of public schools decreased by 71, while the number of public school students rose by nearly 170,000.

Australia now has one of the most unequal and privatised school systems in the world. There is one for the working class and another for the rich. Largely due to the crisis in the public system, and the elevation of the NAPLAN regime as the centrepiece of the country’s education system, more than 40 percent of secondary students now attend private schools.

Behind the official embrace of NAPLAN lies a conscious rejection of a progressive, Enlightenment approach to education: i.e., one that seeks to encourage, within all young people, at every level of schooling, a thirst for inquiry and exploration; the love of learning and reading, of science and nature; of art, drama, music and dance; of sports and physical endeavour; of languages.

On the contrary, NAPLAN has been introduced in order to narrow the curriculum, with the overwhelming emphasis now placed on numeracy and literacy, defined and assessed in the most restrictive manner. In 2009, as education minister, Julia Gillard welcomed the prospect of teachers “teaching to the test.” One of the most serious outcomes has been the growing levels of stress and anxiety among both teachers and students, negatively impacting on their mental health and overall learning.

On the macro level, the publication of NAPLAN scores on the MySchool web site is aimed at pitting school against school, creating the conditions for the closure and amalgamation of so-called “underperforming” public schools and for victimising “underperforming” teachers.

Teachers are being blamed for the crisis in education. Stress is leading thousands to leave the profession, many of them highly experienced and skilled. Around 50 percent of graduate teachers in Australia now resign in their first 5 years.

It is not a coincidence that the reintroduction of discredited teaching methods, such as direct instruction, has taken place precisely as governments in Australia and around the world are turning to militarism and war. They want, not a generation of young, cultured, thoughtful and independent critical thinkers, but a generation of working class youth, inculcated in the spirit of passivity, conformity and obedience, to be “work-ready,” for the military, or for mind-numbing, low-paid, repetitive jobs.

As for tertiary education, half of all university teaching is now done by casuals. Only 6.4 percent of the new positions created between 2009 and 2015 were tenured teaching or research jobs. Tutorials can have as many as 70 students. Likewise, casual, rather than permanent positions are becoming the norm for public school teachers. In Victoria, more than 20 percent of teachers, 45 percent of Education Support staff and 65 percent of teaching graduates are on contracts.

In other words, conditions have become intolerable, for staff and students alike. It is time for teachers, students, parents and the working class as a whole to take matters into their own hands and develop a unified political and industrial struggle against the destruction of public education.

Not a single step forward can be taken, however, while teachers remain trapped within the education unions, the Australian Education Union (AEU) and its state affiliates, including the New South Wales Teachers Federation, and the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU).

The teacher unions organise not struggles but defeats. Their sabotage of a planned national boycott against the NAPLAN regime in 2010 was a historic betrayal that marked a major turning point. Since then, as the insidious logic of “performance benchmarks” has filtered down to every level, the teacher unions have imposed various industrial enterprise bargaining agreements, (EBAs), which divide the teaching workforce along school and state lines, enforce the government’s dictates through anti-democratic means, and stifle and censor opposition.

Every round of AEU-NTEU EBA betrayals has facilitated the further privatisation of the education system, fuelling the insatiable appetites of the transnational “edu-businesses” and financial institutions, now raking in unprecedented profits from the

education “industry.”

Politically, the unions promote the illusion that Labor and/or the Greens represent some kind of “lesser evil” to the Liberals and Nationals. They would prefer that teachers and other workers forget the record of the 2010-13 virtual Labor-Greens coalition government, when Gillard extended NAPLAN and launched MySchool. The Greens’ latest moves to support Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s so-called “Gonski 2.0” funding model, which will provide yet another windfall to the wealthiest private schools, exposes them as nothing but supporters of the education status quo.

The crisis in education is just one expression of the social regression being caused by the capitalist system—a system that is incompatible with meeting the social needs of the working class as a whole. The CFPE advocates the establishment of fighting workplace committees in schools, universities, TAFEs and other workplaces, independent of the unions, that will mobilise education staff—from pre-primary to tertiary—with students, young workers and other sections of the working class, in a common fight against ever-deepening austerity and the growing threat of war.

A mass political movement of the working class must be developed that will take matters into its own hands and launch an offensive against the capitalist system itself. The social right of all to free public education and healthcare, along with decent jobs, housing and access to culture, requires the socialist reorganisation of society in the interests of the majority, not a handful of wealthy parasites. The banks and major corporations must be expropriated and transformed into publicly owned utilities, under the democratic control of the working class, so that the wealth it produces is used to satisfy the social needs and rights of all.

We urge all teachers, Education Support staff, academics, students, workers and young people who agree with this statement to email the CFPE or call 02 8218 3222 and become actively involved in this vital political initiative.



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