

Australia: By-election education “debate” reveals bogus Greens-Labor contest

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Ahead of a federal by-election in the Melbourne electorate of Batman tomorrow, the Australian Education Union (AEU) convened a public debate on March 7 involving the Labor Party and Greens candidates.

The event underscored the fraud of the efforts of the two parties to present themselves as duelling progressive entities. In reality, both are pro-business parties, whose purported policy differences amount to little more than demagoguery. Between 2010 and 2013, the Greens formed a de facto coalition administration with the Labor Party, providing critical parliamentary support for Julia Gillard’s minority government.

Nothing the Gillard government did disrupted the warm relations between Labor and the Greens—from undermining workers’ wages and conditions, to extending Australia’s brutal anti-refugee laws, to lining up with US imperialism’s aggressive confrontation of China.

In public education, the Greens-backed Labor government, supported by the unions, extended the NAPLAN-MySchool standardised testing regime, promised all private schools they would never experience a cut in government funding, and continued to starve public schools of money, while making bogus promises under the banner of “Gonski” supposed “needs-based” funding.

The AEU and the Labor and Green candidates in Batman, Ged Kearney and Alex Bhathal, evidently assumed everyone in the debate audience suffered collective amnesia.

The AEU, consistent with its collaboration in the ruling-class assault on public education, worked to ensure that no critical voices would be permitted. During the question and discussion period, union deputy president Justin Mullaly (a Labor Party member) instructed the person carrying the microphone to audience members not to give it to Will Marshall, a public school teacher and well-known member of the Committee for Public Education

(CFPE) and Socialist Equality Party.

Labor’s Kearney, the president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions since 2010, and the Greens’ Alex Bhathal, a social worker, sought to outdo one another with empty motherhood statements about how they valued public education.

Bhathal’s “left” posturing included criticism of NAPLAN testing and school ranking, calls for teachers to be paid more, higher spending on school infrastructure, full funding for students with disabilities, the de-privatisation of the TAFE trades and technical education system, and more public spending on kindergartens.

Bhathal claimed this all would be implemented because her “election would put pressure on the [state Labor] Andrews government.” She asserted that “if I end up with the balance of power in the federal government, I’ll have power to negotiate about school funding.”

Teachers and education workers, with the working class as a whole, have had bitter experiences with the Greens’ “negotiations” with Labor when they held the balance of power at both the state and federal level.

In the state of Tasmania in 2011, a Labor-Greens coalition government attempted to impose an austerity budget, slashing overall public spending by 10 percent, including through the closure of 20 schools, proposed by Greens’ education minister Nick McKim.

McKim declared, in words that ought to be recalled by those who heard Bhathal’s performance at the AEU’s Batman event: “The Greens have to show that we’re prepared to roll up our sleeves and make decisions that aren’t necessarily going to be popular.”

In their 2010 federal election campaign material, the Greens had declared that “education will be a major funding and policy priority for any responsible government” and pledged to “strongly advocate a high quality, state funded, inclusive public education system.” A different tune was immediately sung once the Greens

were in power and made aware of the financial oligarchy's diktats.

The school-funding model that emerged from the 2010–2013 Greens-backed Gillard government, known as the “Gonski” model, was a complete fraud. It guaranteed continued lavish funding for private schools, while projecting promised funding increases for public schools to the distant and never arriving future.

At the same time, “Gonski” tied every school’s “needs-based” funding to the level expected to ensure that 80 percent of students achieved “above minimum standard” results in NAPLAN tests. In other words, standardised testing was entrenched as the basis for public school funding, while students’ real needs continued to be ignored.

Bhathal made no attempt to reconcile her supposed opposition to NAPLAN testing with her support for “Gonski,” which rests on NAPLAN.

Kearney attempted to promote Gillard’s funding model as an example of how important it was to elect a candidate who would be part of a “party that is in government.” The long-time senior union bureaucrat, responsible for numerous sell-outs of workers’ struggles, boasted of her relations with the AEU leaders, who have enforced countless betrayals against public educators. She described the AEU as “all those people who sat down with Julia Gillard and worked out Gonski... Gonski is and always will be a Labor policy, it was implemented by Labor and put there by Labor.”

Kearney’s ability to promote such a regressive education policy as a progressive measure that benefits public schools is a product of the AEU’s long-standing defence of the Labor Party and the Greens.

While the AEU blocked any questions by the CFPE and Socialist Equality Party—preventing an exposure of the “Gonski” model and the record of Labor and the Greens—anger among public educators and working-class families nevertheless emerged in the discussion period.

Four questions were fielded. A parent asked about the need for funding for a new high school in the northern working-class suburb of Preston. A teacher at Pavilion school in Preston East raised the urgent need for more classroom space for children “who have been excluded from, or disengaged from, mainstream education, [including those] dealing with complex issues such as homelessness, substance dependence, unsafe home environments and relationships, the youth justice system, and other traumatic experiences.”

A parent whose child goes to Reservoir East Primary

School told the audience that it “is in desperate need of capital works and has been constantly overlooked for funding—the buildings are crumbling, the facilities are woefully below standard, and teachers are forced to become ad hoc plumbers and carpenters just to keep the buildings functional enough for our kids.”

A TAFE teacher denounced the privatisation of the vocational education system, explaining that while he had previously campaigned for the Labor Party, now “we are angry, and we are exhausted.”

None of these questions were answered directly by either candidate. Each responded with platitudes and evasions—summing up the entire Batman by-election.

None of the political issues confronting the working class has been dealt with during the campaign—above all the growing danger of a devastating global war that is being prepared by US imperialism and its allies, including in Canberra.

Working people and youth need to break with the Labor Party and Greens, and their trade union accomplices, and build the Socialist Equality Party, the only party that represents their interests and that fights for a revolutionary socialist perspective, including guaranteed free access to first-class education at all levels.

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