Australian teacher unions' phoney campaign against NAPLAN

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As outrage intensifies among parents, teachers and students over the regressive effects of the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing regime on Australian schools, Australian teacher unions are posturing as opponents of the "high-stakes" test. NAPLAN was introduced by the Rudd Labor government in 2008, as the centrepiece of its pro-business "education revolution."

Earlier last month the Australian Education Union (AEU) Victorian Branch emailed its members in that state calling on sub-branches to endorse its resolution against implementing the NAPLAN online trial, to be held in May 2019.

The Australian government is following the US in moving to administer its mandated high-stakes testing regimes on-line, abolishing paper and pencil tests. In the 2015–2016 year, the majority of testing in elementary and middle schools in the US were administered on line, a bonanza for "edu-businesses." On-line testing further exacerbates the divide between high and low socio-economic students, favouring schools and students able to afford state-of-the-art computer equipment and students with keyboard skills.

The resolution states in part, "AEU Joint Primary and Secondary Council have called on the Victorian Education Minister to withdraw Victorian public students and schools from involvement in the NAPLAN online trial."

In May this year, an AEU branch in Australia's most populous state, the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF), released its commissioned report into NAPLAN, which the union claimed was "about dismantling the existing NAPLAN regime." In the September edition of its journal, *Education*, the NSWTF declared that a decision not to publish the results of a botched 2018 NAPLAN online trial represented "further gains" in the union's "campaign to reform NAPLAN."

Aware of the destructive effects of performance ranking tests implemented in previous decades in the United States and Britain, Australian teachers have overwhelmingly been hostile to NAPLAN from the start—even prior to its introduction by the Rudd government. They oppose its narrowing of curricula, resultant stress and anxiety among teachers and students, and the sanctions flowing from poor test results: in other words, the well-known history of high-stakes testing transforming schools into testing "factories."

The teacher unions, on the other hand, have no principled opposition to the testing agenda. The AEU told the Tasmanian Industrial Commission in 2010 that it was "broadly supportive of NAPLAN as a useful component of the broad range of assessment mechanisms continually undertaken in schools."

After just one year of its implementation, angry teachers began pushing for a nation-wide boycott. This however, was sabotaged by the AEU and NSWTF because they had reached a deal with the Gillard Labor government to include them in the government's "working party," ostensibly to oversee the use of student performance data. Cynically hailing their "victory" on behalf of teachers, they then called off any action—without a single mass meeting or discussion among their memberships—insisting, once again, that teachers administer the test.

By 2016, the NSW Liberal government was ramping up the toxic effects of NAPLAN in that state. It imposed a benchmark, despite a prediction that at least 50 per cent of students would be unable to reach it, thus disqualifying them from sitting for university entry exams. Predictably, the union raised no objections, called no meetings, and mounted no campaign against the plan, *Stronger HSC Standards* plan, (the Higher School Certificate, which is the examination most students sit in order to qualify for university.) For its complicity in smothering teacher

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opposition, the NSWTF executive was awarded a "core" seat on the state government's six-member NSW Education Standards Authority, NESA.

In 2018, opposition to standardised testing has only escalated among teachers, students and parents, not only in Australia, but internationally. Earlier this year, former Western Australia Primary Principals' Association president, Steven Breen, spoke on behalf of teachers who were effectively gagged from talking about their attitude to NAPLAN. He told the *Australian.* "People are just so fed up, they're angry. The problem is that NAPLAN is now so high stakes. It's out of hand. Basically, teaching and learning is secondary to NAPLAN… A lot of people retire early, simply because they're fed up. They think, this is not what we got into education for. We now teach less time, because of the bureaucracy, than we did 20 years ago."

Breen's comments underscore the fact that the AEU and NSWTF "campaign" against NAPLAN is a fraud. Aware that any call for action could get out of their control, the unions have consciously limited it. Instead of a nation-wide boycott, the AEU Victorian Branch, for example, has asked individual sub-branches in that state to appeal to the state Education Minister, James Merlino, to withdraw students from the NAPLAN on-line trial in 2019.

In a link accompanying its email to teachers, the AEU conflates its supposed opposition to testing on-line, with opposition to NAPLAN itself. They write, "The Joint Primary and Secondary Council notes that the decision to withdraw support for NAPLAN online is one element of a broader concern about the negative impacts of NAPLAN."

The union then deceitfully claims that Merlino's "public support for a comprehensive review of NAPLAN" has something to do with reversing "the damage being done by NAPLAN."

In reality, state and federal governments have made clear they intend to replace paper tests with on-line testing. In August, Merlino blurted out that the union's aim was, in fact, the extension of NAPLAN! "We need an urgent review by an independent expert into the delays and issues comparing online and paper test data before we continue to progress NAPLAN online to a greater number of schools."

For its part the NSWTF has limited its "campaign" to commissioning an academic paper *Towards a new NAPLAN* by Massachusetts Institute of Technology director, Dr Les Perelman. As the title suggests, the paper does not call for the abolition of NAPLAN. Rather, according to Perelman, NAPLAN needs to be "reformulated and re-imagined to promote and reinforce the curriculum and classroom teaching" (see: "Why is the NSWTF promoting a new NAPLAN?").

Commenting on Perelman's paper a senior educator said, "I hate NAPLAN but am concerned that we will be replacing it with another tyranny, testing children every two weeks and creating even more spurious league tables.

To describe this process as "another tyranny" is accurate. Over more than a decade, teachers at every level have had absolutely no say in the direction of education, whether the introduction of NAPLAN, working conditions, or the array of measures designated as so-called "educational reform."

As far as the government and the various state Departments of Education are concerned, teachers are little more than servants, without a voice or the most basic democratic rights. They are expected to unquestioningly implement a data-driven education that is destructive and punitive, aimed at accelerating the privatisation of the public-school system and increasing the profits of edu-business.

When the AEU, the enforcers of the government's program, complain of a lack of teacher consultation, they are not talking about defending teachers' rights, expertise or opinions. The union's primary concern is to ensure that its own privileged position within the education system is maintained by government.

Teachers and educators must draw some basic conclusions from this untenable situation. To oppose NAPLAN and the overall assault on public education, teachers must take the struggle into their own hands by forming committees that they democratically control, completely independent of the unions. These organisations must give expression to the sentiments of teachers, parents and students, and provide a forum for them to decide on how to organise a fightback.

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