

Only socialist policies can resolve the Australian public education crisis

The Committee for Public Education

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The 2019 federal election has again seen Liberal-National, Labor, and the Greens prominently promising multi-billion dollar investments in Australia's school system. Teachers, parents and other education workers should treat this hollow posturing with contempt.

Even if the headline spending figures were to be delivered—which they will not—the enormous crisis wracking the public education system would not be resolved. Australia's school system is among the most socially polarised in the world, as well as among the most substantially privatised. Some 40 percent of secondary school students now attend private schools, which are heavily subsidised with public funding, including the most expensive and elite. For the sons and daughters of the wealthy and well-off, no extravagance is spared for their education.

What is the reality, on the other hand, for students and staff in public schools across Australia? Successive Labor and Coalition governments at the federal and state level have engineered a social disaster. Countless public schools are grossly overcrowded, with inadequate physical infrastructure and short staffing of critical education support workers, psychologists, and disability support staff.

Underpaid and often casually employed teachers are expected to manage without support the increasing number of students with unfunded disabilities, trauma, and social and learning problems. Crushing workloads accompany expectations of ever greater success with raising student “achievement,” as measured by standardised tests. The toxic environment in many schools sees 50 percent of new university teacher graduates quit the profession within the first five years, while those who remain are vulnerable to mental and physical health problems.

For public school students, their opportunities are

curtailed by the lack of resourcing, compounded by the narrowing of the curriculum that has accompanied the rigid NAPLAN national literacy and numeracy testing that was introduced under the previous Labor government. The deliberate pitting of schools against one another has seen the rise of direct instruction and other regressive teaching methods aimed at delivering a quick boost in test scores, at the expense of authentic learning, creative activities, and play.

In the face of these realities, the claims by the Labor Party and Greens that there is a gulf separating their and the government's school funding policies are a sham, aimed at hoodwinking teachers, parents and education workers.

The Labor Party's document “Fair Funding for Australian Schools” endorses the government's “Gonski 2.0” framework. The original Gonski report was commissioned by the former Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard, and drafted by David Gonski, prominent corporate chief and former chairman of the Australian Stock exchange.

Gonski devised a set of formulas, grounded in NAPLAN test results, that calculated how much public funding per student should be allocated to both public and private schools. The Gonski report, in other words, entrenched and extended the enormous flow of public money into the private education system.

A recent report issued by the Grattan Institute found that between 2007 and 2017, combined federal-state annual school funding increased by just \$155 per public school student, compared to an extraordinary \$1,429 increase per private school student.

Gillard's vaunted spending promises amounted to so much hot air. In 2013 she pledged additional funding of \$14.5 billion, but this was over six years, spanning at least two federal elections, with the vast majority

allocated for the end of this period.

Current Labor leader Bill Shorten has emulated this tactic of pledging spending measures that will supposedly be delivered in the distant future. His headline \$14 billion promise conceals the fine print that less than a quarter of this, \$3.3 billion, is earmarked for Labor's first term in office if it wins today's election.

Whether a single additional cent is allocated to the Australian school system remains to be seen, regardless of which party forms government after May 18. Both Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Shorten have made promises behind closed doors to the credit rating agencies and corporate executives. In the increasingly likely event of a sharp economic downturn, they will implement austerity measures targeting the working class as demanded.

The teacher unions, the Australian Education Union and New South Wales' Teachers Federation, have done everything possible to bolster the Labor Party and Greens' campaigns. Their material sent to teacher members and public school staffrooms has reiterated as good coin these parties' promises on education, including school funding. Union bureaucrats have worked with Labor and the Greens at pre-poll voting centres, distributing "how to vote" cards that urge teachers and those concerned with education to vote for these parties.

This again demonstrates that the teacher unions do not represent the interests of teachers and education staff. The unions bear significant responsibility for the disastrous state of the public education system, not least for their 2010 betrayal of a planned teacher boycott of NAPLAN testing. In the event that a Labor government is formed after May 18, it will work closely with the teacher union bureaucracy to try to suppress opposition and resistance among teachers.

Around the world, public school teachers have been at the forefront of the re-emergence of the working class onto the political stage. Last month, 300,000 Polish teachers conducted a 17-day national strike. Over the last year and a half, educators launched strikes in Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Mexico, Argentina, France, the Netherlands and many other countries. In the US, teachers across multiple states have waged determined industrial and political campaigns to demand decent wages and working conditions, and better resources for their students.

Similar struggles will inevitably emerge in Australia, and sooner rather than later. The critical issue confronting teachers is: What political perspective should guide the fight for public education? The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is campaigning in the federal election campaign to take forward a united struggle of the working class in defence of its interests, in opposition to all those parties and organisations that defend the capitalist system, including the Labor Party and the Greens.

The SEP insists that universal access to a fully funded, high quality education—from kindergarten up to university—must be recognised as a *social right for all*, not a privilege for the wealthy minority. But, like all the social rights of the working class, such as to a job, a liveable income and access to free health care, the right to education immediately conflicts with the agenda of finance capital and the ultra-wealthy oligarchy that exercises a dictatorship over economic and political life.

Securing universal access to first-class education, from kindergarten to university, requires the development of an independent political movement of the working class based on socialist and internationalist principles to abolish the capitalist system.

The Committee for Public Education established by the SEP calls on teachers and parents to show their support for a socialist alternative by voting for the Socialist Equality Party in today's federal election. Above all, however, we urge those who support our perspective and want to fight for it to join the CFPE and to apply to become members of the SEP.



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