

Australia: Bullied teachers reveal union complicity in victimisations—Part 1

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This is the first of a two part series. Read the second part here.

The *Bullied Teachers Support Network* (BTSN) was founded last year to fight teacher victimisation in Australian schools. Its formation makes it one of the first teacher groups, since the establishment of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), to operate independently of the teacher unions.

BTSN's founders Kerrina Swords and Peter Parker have had decades of experience teaching in government schools. Swords was forcibly retired on medical grounds. Parker, whose teaching specialty was history and geography, taught for twenty years in the Australian state of Tasmania, before moving to New South Wales and working for ten years in a Sydney high school. Martin Hughes is now the full-time carer of Sue Campbell, a former high school science teacher with over thirty years' experience in NSW high schools.

Recently, the *World Socialist Web Site* and CFPE held a discussion with the BTSN founders: reviewing their experiences, the restructure of education, the increasing casualisation of the workforce, the devolution of powers to school principals and the attacks on teacher security of tenure. They spoke of the terrible experiences that led to their dismissals, which are becoming common among teachers nationally, and causing serious psychological, physical and financial distress. Not surprisingly, the BTSN now has more than 200 members (see: "Australian teachers establish new Facebook 'support network' against ongoing victimisation").

During the discussion, the WSWWS asked about the response of the teacher unions to the BTSN. Kerrina Swords replied, "The president of the New South Wales Teachers Federation [NSWTF], Maurie Mulheron, denounced us saying we were not teachers. He said, 'They are members of a thing called the "Bullied Teachers Support Network" and they are not teachers.'

He said we had made, 'outrageous, inflammatory and defamatory comments about people working in the system.'

Martin Hughes pointed to the union's attempt to suppress discussion on teacher bullying in schools. "At the recent NSWTF 2019 three-day Annual Conference held in Sydney, a discussion on the topic of bullied teachers was overwhelmingly supported by the 300 delegates to the conference. However, after ten minutes, the union executive undemocratically shut the debate down."

Asked if they had sought individual support from the union, Swords explained that she had attempted to gain assistance for one and a half years, before being forcibly medically retired. "The very first union welfare officer I talked to said what I reported was appalling. I was relieved and thought, 'great, she understands' and felt I was going to be supported. Unfortunately, that was not to be. She ended up advising me to resign if I wanted to end my career with dignity, and retain the right to teach casually. After I was driven out of my school, I was put on the 'Not To Be Employed' list, alongside teachers who have committed criminal acts. This is so offensive and has caused me much grief."

Swords went on to explain, "In 2015, I requested copies of my Teachers Federation [TF] files and was told, in a very officious letter by TF Secretary John Dixon that I could look at my files but not make copies of them. He pompously told me that the notes were taken to assist me, but remained the property of the TF."

Hughes added that the union was well aware of the extent of bullying, and kept records of schools where complaints had been made. "When you lodge a complaint with the union, the complaint goes onto that database. Your school is known. Also reported is the person against whom the complaint has been made. One of our members rang the union to lodge a complaint and was asked, 'Are

you aware that the principal of your school has had another complaint raised against them?’ There’s a case where the principal has received two complaints, but the union has not notified the education department. The union does nothing with that database.”

Outlining his own experience with the union, Peter Parker said, “From the first meeting with the school principal to the day I was removed, there was a revolving door of union officers. None was abreast of my case and none seemed to care. Very few of our 200 BTSN members have anything good to say about the union’s assistance. In our more than 18 months of operation, we have received a deathly silence from the union executive. I have it in writing from John Dixon, and I quote, ‘I have to inform you that Federation does not investigate complaints of workplace bullying.’ But isn’t that what unions are supposed to do?”

“The disciplinary mechanism I was sacked under, the so-called Teacher Improvement Program [TIP], was, in fact, largely written by the NSWTF, leaving us with no question of where their integrity lies.”

Both Parker’s and Hughes’ partners had been dismissed through the TIP. The misnamed TIP was negotiated by the teacher unions in NSW and Victoria, and then embedded in enterprise agreements in 2013, covering teachers’ wages and conditions.

The TIP has nothing to do with “teacher improvement,” but is a mechanism previously promoted by the various state governments and the unions to accelerate the dismissal of teachers designated as “underperforming” and/or “inefficient.”

The introduction of such measures is directly in line with the imposition of a business model in education, with principals transformed into CEOs to drive up productivity, and teachers becoming collectors of data from ever-increasing standardisation and high stakes tests.

Parker explained that TIP was being implemented as part of the restructure of education, used to get rid of teachers who cost more to keep in the classroom. “It’s about making space for casual, lower-paid young teachers,” he said. “Local autonomy, combined with reduced funding, selective schools, neo-liberal ideologies and policies, have created a perfect storm. We have a new generation of principals, forced into managing ever-shrinking budgets, with ever-increasing performance expectations of themselves and their staff. In such pressure cookers, tempers fray, toxic relationships develop, rulebooks go out the window. Work Health and Safety procedures are ignored and it’s every dog for

him/herself.”

Outlining the punishing and anti-democratic process involved in the TIP, Parker said, “TIP is a deceitful exercise in so-called ‘procedural fairness.’ I was forced to endure nine months of the most underhanded, dishonestly fabricated theatre I have ever witnessed.”

“They had me over a barrel because I was what they call a ‘new scheme teacher,’ even though I had been teaching for thirty years, twenty in the state of Tasmania and ten in NSW. This meant I had to keep a record of my professional development and folio of work in the school and present that at the end of every five years.

“The first one I sailed through. The second one was due after ten years. I took my accreditation to the new principal to sign off and he refused to do it, on the grounds that he had heard I was ‘underperforming.’ He said, ‘Before I sign off on this, I’d like to visit some of your classes. I’ve heard you are having performance issues.’”

“2015 became living hell. My head teacher increasingly isolated me from staffroom gatherings, left me out of the email loop and generally white-anted me. Colleagues who were once trustworthy and reliable became distant and detached.

“At no stage had my head teacher ever discussed the issue of my under-performance. She had never visited my classroom, critiqued a lesson, offered feedback and support or demonstrated any concern over my teaching ability. She signed off on my annual professional development interviews each year. Instead, she contacted the parent of one of my Year 11 students, a 16-year-old girl, who was asked to secretly critique ten of my lessons while she was supposedly sitting in my class learning.

“The critique was quite childishly written, such as ‘Sir told a bad dad joke and nobody laughed.’ When the critiques were presented, the NSWTF representative, without the bat of an eyelid, failed to step in and call this out. If the method of critiquing a teacher by a student is going to be taken on, it means that every teacher on the planet is vulnerable. Even more terrifying was that the union advised me to sign the TIP documentation, claiming there was nothing they could do to stop it.”

To be continued



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