

Australia: Bullied teachers reveal union complicity in victimisations—Part 2

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

Martin Hughes' partner, Sue Campbell, a highly-experienced teacher, had been a member of the union for 31 years. Her encounter with bullying led to serious psychological trauma, breakdown and physical illness, so that she now requires full-time care. She was initially placed on a Teacher Improvement Program (TIP), after spurious complaints against her. The principal had never discussed the complaints or indicated that he considered them valid.

Hughes explained: "Halfway through the program she had a fall, which resulted in a brain injury. Students were setting up for the sports carnival. The hall had too many people in it, exceeding safety limits. Sue was walking downstairs, about to hand out leaflets to the students, when one student put his foot right in front of where she was going to tread, and she stepped forward and fell over, landing on the right side of her head.

"Initially, she had a headache which she reported to the school. No ambulance was called and no first aid help given. She was allowed to drive home, even though she was living alone. She spent the weekend home alone.

"On Monday, the headache got worse and she went to her doctor, who gave her pain-killing tablets and two days off work. On Tuesday, she became incontinent and called an ambulance to go to hospital. She was diagnosed with a brain injury.

"Sue was off work for six months and then the Workers Compensation representative demanded she return to work. She complained that she couldn't read properly, but the education department took no notice of her complaints, despite students picking out the fact that she was reading words wrongly. Eventually, she was taken out of the school and made to sit in the department's area office.

"She was finally dismissed, via a letter that said no more than that her dismissal was for disciplinary reasons in accordance with the Act. She approached the union, who said she did not have a case and would not represent her. Instead, she was told, 'We'll organise casual teaching for

you.' This confused me. She cannot read properly due to her accident at school. How can she be a casual teacher?"

The most undemocratic aspect of this Kafkaesque process is the stipulation that accused teachers are bound by a confidentiality clause, meaning they cannot alert their fellow teachers to the anti-democratic process being imposed throughout the public school system.

Parker, said, "I believe part of the reason for needing a confidentiality gag is to help conceal the truth of how it is being administered. For example, my principal falsely claimed that I had graded a Year 10 student's essay incorrectly. By having the essay marked externally, by a university plagiarism check, I was quickly able to prove him incorrect. However, because I was unable to discuss the essay with my colleagues, the principal was able to continue using this example as evidence of my inefficiency."

Hughes explained that his partner had been informed she was able to have a support person in the school, but whenever she approached another teacher, they turned their back and walked away. "They had all been told, apparently, not to support her. Most school union reps are frightened to do anything, because they're fearful of being targeted by the bullies too. We've had meetings, where the union organiser has turned up to support the principal—the bully—rather than the victim."

This year, after a surge in work-place bullying and demands for reform of the Employee Performance and Conduct Unit, former Senior Crown Prosecutor Mark Tedeschi carried out a review. Despite the obvious conflict of interest, if a teacher complained of being bullied by the principal and the investigation was to be carried out internally by the principal or regional director, the review recommended that principals were in the "best position to deal with such issues expeditiously and with local knowledge."

Demonstrating the union's total complicity in this situation, NSWTF's Maurie Mulheron declared that the issue of bullying in schools was complicated. "A perception of being bullied doesn't mean it's bullying. Being asked to

do something reasonable is not bullying,” he said.

Last month the NSW Department of Education secretary, Mark Scott, reported to a budget estimates committee that about 14 percent of teachers passed the TIP in 2018–19, while 9 percent passed in 2017–18, 3 percent passed in 2016–17 and 12 percent passed in 2015–16. Overall the pass rates for teachers forced on TIP ranged from 3 percent to 14 percent. In 2018, about 100 teachers had left their roles after failing the TIP. Scott also reported that the teacher unions were working with the department to streamline some processes.

Between 2015 and 2017, the number of NSW teachers dismissed, either for misconduct or after failing TIPs, increased by 50 percent. In 2019, a government survey of staff in NSW schools found 34 percent had witnessed a bullying event during their career and 18 percent had experienced bullying.

Unlike Parker and Hughes’ partner, Sword was not placed on TIP, but forcibly medically retired. According to the NSW Education Department’s official record, the number of teachers forcibly medically retired increased, in some years, by 600 per cent.

Sword explained, “There were so many instances of bullying. One example was when I asked for 60 sheets of A3 art paper for two of my eleven classes. I was told by the School Administrative Manager [SAM] I couldn’t have them. I went to the deputy principal to ask him to step in. He told me the paper was too expensive. I went away and researched how much a ream [500 sheets] cost. A whole ream was \$7. I went back to the deputy principal and told him that ‘it’s too expensive’ wasn’t a valid reason to deny me the paper. He said to leave it with him and later came to me with 60 A3 sheets. He then sent me a terse email, warning me not to make further comment about the paper issue as it had stirred up trouble. Unbelievable, petty, controlling behaviour from both the SAM and deputy principal.

“The incident that marked the beginning of the end for me occurred on the last day of 2012, just after my mother died. The SAM intervened when I requested to borrow a school camera. I calmly told her to stop interfering. The principal screamed at me and threatened to report me to the regional director. I came in on the last day of the school year—my day off—to resolve this but the principal said he was too busy. He said, as he passed me, ‘I’m doing something important, getting ice for the drinks party.’ I was anxious all over the long school holidays. Twelve weeks later, the principal stated he had gone ahead and reported me to the director, although I was told that the director hadn’t received a complaint. That resulted in me making a formal complaint about the principal. He had more reason to target me after

that.”

It is clear that the union is not only failing to support teachers who are unfairly targeted, but actively supporting those responsible for this witch-hunt. That is why the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) has called for rank-and-file committees, made up of concerned teachers, parents and students, which will act entirely independently of the unions, in all public schools. These will function as genuinely democratic organisations that will fight to defend the democratic rights of victimised teachers/educators and the development of a high-quality, transparent public-school system.

Kerrina Sword’s response to the CFPE’s call for such rank and file committees was immediate and enthusiastic.

“I agree, with that. Something like that will have to happen to reduce the likelihood of the type of bullying that damages teachers’ careers, while also adversely affecting the students, the school and school communities. It is appalling that something like the BTSN has to exist.”

Adding his comments to the CFPE’s calls for committees that are independent of the union, Parker said, “Teachers will organise, and they will fight back.”

“Public education is a far too precious asset to privatise into oblivion. Healthy democracies depend on healthy public education institutions. When every door of justice is slammed in our faces, we have a choice: Walk away, or come to realise that the only avenue remaining is non-violent social activism.

“Our opponents may not appreciate our arrival on the stage yet, but they are going to have to live with the new reality of unofficial unionism. As we have seen in the USA, teachers are bypassing their atrophied unions and marching in protest. It is only a matter of time before the same thing happens here.”

Concluded



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