

Australia: Growing opposition to planned school closures in northern NSW

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A plan by the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National government to amalgamate four schools in the state's northern Tweed valley has provoked widespread opposition from parents and teachers who have warned of possible job cuts, land privatisation and school overcrowding.

NSW Education Minister Sarah Mitchell announced on October 28 that four schools in the town of Murwillumbah would be folded into a single "super-school" to be operational by 2024.

Murwillumbah Public School and Murwillumbah East Public School, which both cater to primary students, will effectively be closed, as will Wollumbin High School. Their pupils will be sent to Murwillumbah High School, which is to be "upgraded" so that it can accommodate 1,500 or more students from kindergarten to year 12.

The announcement, which came without warning, has been met with anger from local residents. The Murwillumbah Teachers Association, which includes staff at all four schools, passed a motion opposing the plan earlier this month. A Facebook page entitled "Save Murwillumbah Schools" has received almost 600 'likes' in several weeks, while a petition to the state government calling for the merger to be scrapped has been signed by more than 3,000 people.

The New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF), the union that covers most public school staff in the state, and the Labor Party opposition, have posed as opponents of the closures. Both are seeking to cover up the fact that the merger is a continuation of years of cuts to education including under union-backed Labor governments at the state and federal levels.

The NSWTF and Labor are instead presenting the amalgamation as being solely the product of the right-wing proclivities of the state government. They are seeking to divert opposition into the dead-end of feckless appeals to Liberal-National ministers, and are complaining primarily that the closures are being pushed through without adequate "consultation."

In reality, the abrupt character of the announcement, and subsequent declarations by the government that the amalgamation will proceed regardless of opposition, are inextricably tied to the regressive agenda underlying the closures.

The Liberal government has declared that the merger will involve a \$100 million investment, however the details remain scanty. The government had pledged two years ago to upgrade both Murwillumbah High and Murwillumbah East, including through the construction of "new permanent teaching spaces and core facilities to address enrolment growth."

The pledge was never carried through. It has effectively been nullified by the closure announcements, at least at Murwillumbah East, which will now be shuttered.

The amalgamation also raises the prospect that the valuable land upon which the three closed schools are located could be sold-off to developers. Liberal-National ministers have said that this will not take place, but successive governments have privatised public assets and land over the past three decades, providing a bonanza to big business.

The government has similarly sought to damp-down fears of job cuts, with Education Minister Mitchell telling the *Sydney Morning Herald* that no permanent teachers will be sacked. In the same breath, however, she stated that planning factored in teacher retirements and departures. In other words, permanent positions are to be slashed, initially through attrition.

Significantly, Mitchell signalled a desire to collaborate with the union in any future job destruction, declaring that the government would "sit down with the Teachers' Federation and other community members to talk through that."

Parents and teachers have also raised concerns about the prospects of long-term overcrowding as the local population grows, and have queried what will be done with current students while the "upgrade" of Murwillumbah High School is being carried out. More broadly, they have warned that a mass "super-school" is incapable of providing the tailored education and assistance of a smaller facility, and that students who are impoverished or have learning difficulties will be disadvantaged.

Similar school amalgamations elsewhere in regional and rural areas have created a host of problems.

This week, for instance, the Education Department announced that it was installing eight demountable buildings at the northern NSW Ballina Coast High School, which was opened last year following the merger of two existing schools. The buildings, which resemble detached sheds, will serve as

classrooms following an increase in enrollments.

A report released early this year into the 2019 folding of Griffith and Wade High Schools into Murrumbidgee Regional High School, found similar issues. The study into the western NSW “super-school” found that following the merger staff workloads had dramatically increased, and the onerous conditions had made it difficult to attract new teachers.

According to the University of New South Wales report, the number of teachers who said they were satisfied with their role had plummeted from around 52 percent, prior to the merger, to just 23.8 percent, compared with a state average of around 80 percent. One staff member said that staff well-being was at an “all-time low,” while as many as 1,000 separate classes were not covered in the first year of the new school’s operations, meaning that students were left to do nothing with minimal supervision.

The NSWTF did nothing to block that merger.

The union, moreover, has worked hand in glove with Labor governments as they have carried identical policies to those now being implemented by the Liberal-National Coalition.

In 2010, for instance the NSW state Labor government commissioned a secret report from the Boston Consulting Group, aimed at identifying up to \$1.8 billion in public education funding cuts. As the WSWS noted, after the report was leaked to the media, the briefing proposed “closing more than 100 government schools, axing 7,500 teaching jobs, as well as those of 1,500 school support staff, selling off ‘surplus’ school land and cutting back programs to disadvantaged students.”

The government acted on some of the recommendations, including by initially seeking to close Gosford Public school, and then trying to merge it with the nearby Henry Kendall School. As the Liberal-National government is arguing now, Labor absurdly insisted that these policies, which were opposed by parents, teachers and thousands of local residents, were not aimed at slashing costs.

Labor has a similar record in every other state. In Victoria, for instance, a Labor government retained the cuts made during the 1990s by former Liberal premier Jeff Kennett, who slashed 9,000 permanent teaching jobs and shuttered more than 300 schools.

Nationally, Labor has played a central role in the corporatisation of the education sector. It was the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, with Julia Gillard as education minister, that introduced NAPLAN, modelled on standardised testing in US schools. Its aim, along with Labor’s entire “education revolution,” was to force schools to compete with one another for funding, narrow the curriculum to literacy and numeracy, and align school education ever more closely with the interests of so-called “edu-business.”

The consequence of the decades-long assault on public schools, including Labor’s Gonski funding model, has been to create one of the most unequal educational systems among

OECD countries.

The WSWS noted a report last August, which found that “The decade between 2009 and 2018 saw an increase of total income for private and Catholic schools nine to ten times higher than for public schools. Income for private schools increased by 16.9 percent per student, 19.7 percent in Catholic schools, but only 2.1 percent in public schools.”

Public school teachers face ever-greater levels of casualisation, constantly increasing workloads, and growing class sizes. This year, they have been imperilled by the coronavirus pandemic, with governments insisting on dangerous school reopenings, justified with the discredited assertion that children do not transmit the virus, so as to force parents to their places of employment to generate corporate profit.

The unions, including the NSWTF, have played the central role in enforcing all of these attacks. Whatever their weasel-words of concern, they have collaborated with governments to push through a cost-cutting agenda demanded by big business, in line with their role as an industrial police force.

The record has demonstrated that the unions will not mount a genuine struggle against the northern NSW school closures. Instead, parents and teachers must break with these corporatised organisations and form new organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees, aimed at prosecuting an industrial and political campaign against the closures.

The ongoing assault on public schools, underscores the need for a new, socialist perspective which rejects the subordination of education, and every other social need, to the profit demands of big business.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), which fights for this perspective, can be contacted here:

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