Australian inquiry reveals disastrous working conditions of public school teachers

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Despite its limited terms of reference, a new inquiry into the working conditions of public school teachers in New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, has revealed an escalating crisis in the sector. Teachers confront soaring workloads, endless policy changes and wholly inadequate resources to address the complex challenges facing students in the public education system.

The inquiry, entitled *Valuing the Teaching Profession*, was commissioned by the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF). The union appointed Geoff Gallop, former Labor premier of Western Australia, to chair the investigation. Gallop is a pro-business figure who won office in 2001 after a campaign that denounced the state Liberal government for supposedly overspending and endangering the state's budget surplus.

Others on the inquiry panel were Dr Tricia Kavanagh, former justice of the NSW Industrial Court and Patrick Lee, who previously worked at the NSW Institute of Teachers.

Without providing any explanation, the report noted that the inquiry was the first to be held in 17 years. This was a period, it stated, during which changes in public education "dwarfed" those of any other era, going back half a century.

The disastrous state of the sector revealed by the inquiry is the result of bipartisan policies implemented by state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal alike, that threaten the very future of public education. The NSWTF and the Australian Education Union (AEU) have refused to mobilise teachers against these attacks, instead functioning as indispensable props enforcing each new government measure.

In its 200-page report, the inquiry found that as a result of increased compliance measures, constant curriculum changes, greater administrative requirements, the imposition of data collection and other regressive policies, Australian teachers work among the longest hours in the developed world.

The inquiry revealed that full-time classroom teachers averaged 55 hours per week and school principals some 62. In a chapter headed "A cascade of policies," the report listed hundreds of new policies announced through the media without prior communication with schools. Schools are then required to provide evidence of their compliance with these often confusing and contradictory directives.

The report also revealed the increasing prevalence of casual employment, especially in schools with disadvantaged students. While permanent full-time tenure had traditionally been the norm in the sector, the proportion of permanent teachers is now down to 59 percent. Government cost-cutting measures, including the 2012 NSW school autonomy model, Local Schools Local Decisions (LSLD), have driven the change.

At the same, enrolments of students with high needs have increased. The inquiry found that in 2002, 4.2 percent of students had a disability. By 2019, the proportion had risen to 15.6 percent. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments were up from 4.7 percent in 2004, to 8 percent in 2019. Over the same period, the proportion of students with a language background other than English increased from 26.4 percent to 35.9 percent.

Part of the LSLD school autonomy brief was to abolish 800 positions responsible for providing support services to public schools. The state education department's Education Equity Strategy Unit, which had specialised bodies to assist disadvantaged and high needs pupils, was replaced by a monetised fund devolving responsibility for finding support for these students to the schools.

The inquiry also revealed a growing teacher shortage. At the start of the 2021 school year 1,250 permanent teacher positions across NSW were reported as unfilled. At a recent meeting of union members, NSWTF President Angelo Gavrielatos claimed 15,000 new teachers would be required annually to meet an expected growth in student enrolments.

The report highlighted the effects on teachers' working conditions of the constant changes to the school curriculum over the past decade. A revised national school curriculum was introduced into NSW schools between 2014 to 2018. Before educators were able to finalise the changes to lesson planning and teaching methods that this required, a further redesign of the curriculum was demanded in the 2018, Gonski 2.0 report.

In line with Gonski 2.0., NSW Liberal Premier Gladys Berejiklian announced "the biggest shake-up" to the state's curriculum in three decades. A centre-piece of the new plan is the abolition of the existing year structure of syllabuses and its replacement with many hundreds of "learning progressions."

The inquiry described the policy as an "untimed syllabus."

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This is misleading. The Gonski 2.0 report directed that each student achieve "at least one year's growth in every learning year" and stated that a school principal's performance review would be judged on that basis.

Teachers will be tasked with endlessly ensuring that each student is on track to attain their own "learning target." An "online tool" will identify each student's "progress" via their "unique identifying number." Thus, students are to become individual automatons in programs devised and "evaluated" by edu-businesses.

Moreover, if principal performance is to be judged on the basis of annual student "progressions," greater teacher "accountability" and threats to job security for those who do not meet the targets will follow.

The inquiry expressed no opposition in principle to this regime, merely calling for more time and resources to implement it. Trials of the program are due to start in schools over the coming months.

The report noted an "explosion in mental distress and illness" among children and adolescents and an increasing reliance on schools to deal with these issues. It pointed to statistics showing that the poorest children were three times as likely to suffer mental health issues, yet the Inquiry's recommendation, for 1 counsellor to 500 children, is worse than inadequate.

None of the inquiry's recommendations challenges any of the underlying policies responsible for the crisis in the state's public schools.

Its recommendation that teachers be given an extra two hours a week to deal with their workload is a call for window-dressing that would resolve nothing.

The report did not demand an end to the National Assessment Program–Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing regime, which was the centrepiece of the Rudd Labor government's pro-business "education revolution." Instead it merely called on the government to "commence a process to establish NAPLAN testing on a random survey basis." A recent review of NAPLAN conducted by the state premiers of NSW, Queensland and Victoria, already ruled this out.

As for the inquiry's call for a 10-15 per cent pay rise, teachers can have no confidence the NSWTF will carry out a serious fight to attain this. In October last year, the NSW Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) decreed that public sector workers in the state should receive a mere 0.3 percent annual pay increase, instead of the 2.5 percent they had expected on July 1. Not a word of opposition was heard from the NSWTF.

The report's terms of inquiry did not address funding policies, which have exacerbated a glaring socio-economic divide between public and private schools. From 2009-2018, government funding increases across the country were nine to ten times greater for private schools than for public institutions.

The NSWTF has mounted no opposition to the state's new 2021 model, *School Success*, which aims to further cut costs and institute an even more intensive monitoring of student and school performance, without restoring any of the 800 curriculum support positions axed.

The inquiry was a cynical attempt by the union to halt a decline in its membership and to secure a place at the bargaining table with the government and education authorities.

This is of a piece with "mini-walkouts" of 20 minutes currently being orchestrated by the NSWTF in some schools around the state. These stoppages are aimed at letting-off steam among teachers, without any genuine struggle against the conditions they face, while facilitating closer union collaboration with education department officials, the Labor Party opposition and the Greens.

The Gallop Inquiry is the latest fraud being perpetrated by the NSWTF against teachers and students alike.

It recalls the 2002 Vinson Inquiry, also commissioned by the union. The resulting report documented the impact of funding cuts, including mounting workloads, inadequate facilities and a growing education crisis in working class areas.

The Vinson Inquiry's paltry recommendations were ignored, while the NSWTF and the Australian Education Union proceeded to openly support, or demobilise opposition to, one attack after another on public education. The consequence is that 17 years on, all of the problems identified by the Vinson Inquiry are an order of magnitude worse than in 2002.

This underscores the fact that a fight by teachers for decent wages, conditions and permanent jobs, and for high-quality and fully-resourced public education, can only proceed through a rebellion against the NSWTF and the unions.

New organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees, are required, as is an alternative socialist perspective which rejects the subordination of education to the dictates of big business, governments and the corporations.

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

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