

Australian state Labor government imposes anti-democratic “code of conduct” changes on school staff

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At the start of the school year, with immediate effect, the New South Wales (NSW) Labor government amended its code of conduct for all public, independent and Catholic teachers and school staff in the state, explicitly prohibiting any alleged incitement of hatred toward anyone based on race.

While presented as necessary to combat “hate speech” and ensure students feel safe, the changes are a weapon to silence opposition to the ongoing Gaza genocide and imperialist war more broadly.

Teachers and other staff members can now face disciplinary charges and dismissal for making any anti-genocide or anti-Zionist statements, which can be construed as inciting hostility toward Jewish people.

As of February 11, point 5.3 in the NSW Department of Education’s “code of ethics and conduct” states that school staff members must “not engage in conduct that would incite hatred towards a person or a group of persons on the grounds of race.”

This prohibition extends to political opinions expressed beyond the classroom, including participation in protests. The code explicitly refers to social media posts. One of the examples of “inappropriate” conduct is: “An employee publishes content on social media channels inciting hatred towards persons based on their race.”

This is a sweeping attack on the free speech, protest and other democratic rights of educators.

The changes are in line with anti-democratic state and federal Labor government “hate crime” and anti-protest laws imposed in the wake of the December 14 Bondi Beach massacre. Labor governments have seized on the reactionary Bondi killings, committed by two alleged Islamic State-linked gunmen, to justify far-reaching curbs on protest and speech. This includes the outlawing of political groups by ministerial decree and imprisonment

of their supporters on the false basis that opposition to the ongoing Gaza genocide constitutes antisemitic hatred of Jews.

These laws go far beyond the already draconian “hate speech” legislation rushed through the federal and NSW parliaments last February by Labor governments in collaboration with the Liberal-National Coalition. Those laws criminalised “inciting racial hatred” or “advocating” force or violence against anyone based on race or religion.

In an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), NSW Premier Chris Minns said the new code of conduct measures were part of a wider crackdown on “hate speech” in schools and public institutions, explicitly linking the new rules to alleged antisemitism and “security” after the Bondi attack.

The code of conduct changes effectively give principals broad powers to discipline staff and initiate proceedings to deregister them, barring them from employment in any school. The NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) will be responsible for amending its teacher registration requirements to add the new legal definitions of “hate speech” to its bans on “immoral or unethical behaviour.”

Under the new rules, NESA will have expanded powers to determine sanctions on school staff, up to and including sacking teachers. Such sanctions will not depend on police prosecuting an alleged offence, let alone securing a conviction, bypassing the judicial system entirely.

In an interview with the *Guardian*, Minns declared: “If it’s clear to NESA that there’s been a breach ... then sanctions will apply.” In another radio interview, Minns said the changes responded to cases where the government had previously “felt it has been unable to take action” after teachers had been accused of hate speech. He proclaimed: “If you participate in hate speech, even if it’s not on the school grounds, then you’re not the kind of

person that we want shaping young minds.”

NESA, which regulates teacher registration, accreditation of schools, curriculum and assessment, is governed by a board appointed by the NSW government. The board is chaired by Peter Shergold, who also chairs the Australian Research Council, which last year suspended a research grant held by Macquarie University academic Randa Abdel-Fattah at the behest of the federal Labor government because of her anti-Zionist views.

Other board members include Angelo Gavrielatos, a former president of the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF), the trade union that has suppressed opposition by educators to the attacks on their pay and working conditions for decades.

The education unions are completely complicit in this latest assault. Last week, the NSWTF sent out a “Member Alert” revealing that it had been consulted on the rule changes and provided “feedback” supporting the education department’s “need to recognise changes to the law.”

The “Alert” sought to blindfold educators to the changes and suppress opposition. It claimed that the new rules and examples were “unremarkable.” It falsely asserted that nothing had changed because “such behaviour would have been considered unprofessional and unacceptable prior to the updated code.”

For its part, the Independent Education Union, which covers private and religious schools, welcomed the changes, openly supporting the draconian measures. These responses confirm that the union leaderships will assist the Labor government to enforce the chilling code.

Bans on “hate speech” based on dubious definitions and expanded disciplinary powers create a climate of fear. These measures will target political speech rather than actual criminal conduct. Teachers who discuss imperialist wars, examine the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza or support student protest risk censure, suspension or dismissal. Students who wear symbols of solidarity—keffiyehs, Palestinian flags or protest slogans—already face exclusion, fines or police intervention. Entire staffrooms will self-censor in order to avoid reprisals.

The education system as a whole is a particular target of this repressive campaign. Just days after the Bondi attack, the Albanese federal Labor government established the Antisemitism Education Taskforce, co-chaired by pro-Zionist corporate lawyer Jillian Segal and big business figure David Gonski. Under the guise of educating children about antisemitism, its aim is to suppress

oppositional, anti-genocide and anti-war sentiments, and to impose a regime under which educators at all levels are in fear of being targeted.

As governments funnel billions into militarism, including the AUKUS pact and other US-driven preparations for war, silencing opposition has become a necessity. Education is being subordinated to the needs of the governments and corporate interests, trying to indoctrinate students, insulating them from political radicalisation and criminalising opposition.

The defence of democratic rights cannot be entrusted to the union leaderships, which have time and again acted as agents of the state—collaborating to suppress strikes and protests and to channel teachers’ anger into narrow industrial action and protests. The response must be political and independent: the building of rank-and-file committees (RFCs) of teachers, students and parents in every school to defend free discussion, oppose victimisation and insist on free first-class education for all.

These committees must coordinate regionally and link with workers in transport, health and other sectors to defend democratic rights and halt the turn to militarism. The struggle in the schools is inseparable from the broader fight against austerity, war and police-state measures. The Socialist Equality Party and the Committee for Public Education call on educators, students and parents to reject the Labor governments’ authoritarian agenda and to build independent, democratic organisations in the schools.

To discuss these issues and how to form RFCs, please contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators’ network.

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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