Australia: NSW Teachers Federation collaborates in teacher dismissals

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Two experienced teachers recently contacted the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators' rank-and-file network, after being placed on Informal Support Plans, the first stage of being dismissed for "under-performance" via the so-called Teacher Improvement Program (TIP).

When they sought assistance from the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF), they were told that union support officers were "inundated," with seven staff handling more than 500 cases.

This admission points to a widening offensive against teachers. Yet the union continues to insist there is "relative stability" in TIP numbers, concealing the scale and implications of the process.

The TIP system facilitates the removal of experienced, higher-paid permanent teachers and their replacement with younger, lower-paid and insecure staff. It is being used to intimidate, witch hunt and dismiss longstanding teachers—particularly those who are independent and critical about what is happening in schools—as both federal and state governments slash public education spending, increase workloads, cut real wages, suppress anti-genocide dissent, enforce standardised testing and introduce temporary contracts at the expense of permanent positions.

Under the TIP, principals can place teachers on an Informal Support Plan, a mechanism introduced in 2019. This triggers an intensive regime of surveillance and assessment. If teachers are deemed not to have "improved," they face dismissal. In practice, many are driven to resign under the strain.

Social media posts by teachers attest to the travesty of the process. "Staff are put on these simply because they don't like that staff member and it can simply be because they ask questions," one wrote. Another commented: "My principal never… looked at my lessons, programs etc. He just had an interview and said I have concerns, and you are to be placed on a support program. I could see this is what he had done to two other staff." Another wrote: "This is a strategic way for schools to 'out' a teacher they don't want in their school. There's little chance of being successful for those on TIP."

The TIP was imposed through enterprise agreements in 2014–2015, negotiated by the NSWTF and the Australian Education Union (AEU) in Victoria, affecting more than 120,000 public school teachers. Its origins lie in a 2009 call by NSWTF deputy president Gary Zadkovich for a mechanism to fast-track teacher dismissals. The trade unions did not passively accept this framework—they initiated and developed it.

In fact, the unions embraced an agenda long espoused by right-wing think tanks: blaming individual teachers and schools for "poor school performance," instead of the chronic under-resourcing that is the primary cause of the difficulties that teachers and students face, particularly in working-class areas.

From its inception, the TIP was a union-government collaboration aimed at dismantling job security and enforcing the pro-market "education revolution" of the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013. This program, cloaked in the rhetoric of equity and reform, subordinated public education to cost-cutting and market imperatives.

Experience has shown that the role of the trade unions is not to defend teachers, but to facilitate the TIP process. Teachers can only challenge allegations through union representatives, who are structurally integrated into the framework alongside school management. At the same time, confidentiality provisions—enforced with union backing—prevent teachers from discussing their cases with colleagues, ensuring isolation and blocking any collective resistance.

This reality was exposed in the case of Nadia Ryan (a pseudonym), a teacher with 35 years' experience placed

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on the TIP in 2016. The NSWTF instructed her to "go with the TIP" while assisting school executives in carrying out the procedure.

When Ryan challenged her dismissal in the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC), the union refused to support her, forcing her to bear $160,000 in legal costs. The IRC acknowledged that TIP procedures had not been followed but refused to order her reinstatement.

That outcome demonstrated that even proven breaches and findings of unfair dismissal are effectively meaningless. The TIP framework vests decisive authority in principals, with union representatives embedded in the process, leaving teachers without any genuine right of appeal.

This year, at the NSWTF's March State Council, a delegate reported growing concern among teachers about an apparent increase in TIP cases. The delegate noted that many teachers are unaware that an ISP marks the beginning of a disciplinary process, raised reports that some executives are incentivised to initiate TIPs as part of their own career advancement, and asked whether union representatives and activists were being disproportionately targeted.

In response, NSWTF deputy secretary Sam Clay effectively dismissed all concerns. He acknowledged that full data for 2025 would not be available until later in 2026, yet still claimed there had been no increase in TIP usage. He did not dispute that teachers are being drawn into disciplinary processes without understanding their implications.

Clay claimed that union delegates and activists are subjected to TIPs at a "proportionately lower rate." That is itself revealing. If true, that confirms that the target is not teachers who support the role of the union but those who express dissent.

The NSWTF has not conducted a review of the TIP since 2019, despite repeated concerns raised by teachers and the program's capacity to destroy careers. The union leadership's insistence that no review is necessary amounts to a cover-up of its central role in a system of victimisation and cost-cutting.

These attacks are intensifying amid a deepening crisis in public education. Under the Albanese federal Labor government and the Minns state Labor government, teacher shortages have reached unprecedented levels.

Around 50 percent of teaching students do not complete their degrees, while 70 percent of teachers plan to leave before retirement. Schools are increasingly reliant on underqualified and temporary staff. Yet at the very moment teachers are most urgently needed, the TIP is being used to accelerate their removal.

This is not a failure of the unions, but the expression of their real function. In Australia and internationally, union apparatuses operate as instruments of governments, enforcing austerity and stifling opposition. In Victoria, the AEU is trying to push through a sellout agreement, twice rejected by teachers and education support staff. In the United States, teacher unions have isolated struggles against school closures and budget cuts.

The defence of teachers' jobs, conditions, and democratic rights cannot be entrusted to the unions or the industrial courts, which are aligned with the ongoing market restructuring and privatisation of education.

During the 1960s and 70s, teachers waged bitter struggles to defend their security of tenure and prevent victimisation by inspectors and education administrators. The unions have now torn up these hard-won gains by helping to devise and police new methods to discipline and sack teachers.

What is required is not a modification of the TIP, but its abolition through a counter-offensive by teachers and educators.

The CFPE urges teachers to break politically from the straitjacket of the unions and the Labor Party and to establish independent rank-and-file committees, taking a lead from the recently formed Victorian Educators' Rank-and-File Committee. These committees must unite teachers, parents, students, and broader sections of the working class in a struggle to defend teachers' basic democratic rights and the right of all students to a high-quality, free, and fully-resourced public education.

Teachers are urged to contact the CFPE to discuss their experiences and participate in building these committees.

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