

Australian teachers establish new Facebook “support network” against ongoing victimisation

By Erika Zimmer
26 June 2019

The names of the three victimised teachers have been changed, in order to prevent their further victimisation.

Some 200 Australian teachers have taken to Facebook to fight—independently of the teacher unions—their victimisation, under the pro-market “education revolution” agenda, introduced to the public education system in 2008 by then Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

The *Bullied Teachers Support Network* (BTSN) was founded last year by three victimised teachers, Kerry Steele, Peter Parker, and Martin Hughes. The group gained front page coverage in last February’s edition of the *Australian Teacher Magazine* (ATM), a publication that claims over 225,000 readers.

The members of BTSN represent the tip of the iceberg. According to the 2018 New South Wales (NSW) Public Sector Employee Survey, “People Matter,” nearly a quarter of the 15,000 high school teachers in Australia’s most populous state, claim to have been bullied, with nearly half of them identifying their immediate superior, principal or deputy principal as their workplace bully.

EducationHQ, which publishes the ATM, launched a national survey of educators last year and reported that the “majority of participants explicitly noted serial bullying from school leadership, and the toll it’s taken, not only on their careers, but their physical and mental health.” One respondent wrote, “The biggest challenge I have faced is my principal!” Another defined their greatest problem as “bullying from other staff and leadership, to the point I planned to take my own life. I left the workplace of eight years... after being accused of grooming students because I called them all ‘darling.’ Limited union guidance and zero support from school.”

Bullying in the work place is not unique to schools, nor is it unique to Australia. Research undertaken in 2018 by a University of New South Wales (UNSW) business school, *Business Think* found that Australia had the sixth highest rate of workplace bullying, when compared with 34 European countries. According to Safe Work Australia, between 2011-2015 the average national rate of bullying increased 40 percent.

UNSW research showed that increasing casualisation, inequality in work demands and stagnant wages was leading to rising bullying incidents in the workplace. It stated, “Globally, rapid changes in work patterns, such as the growth of zero-hour contracts and the so-called gig economy, are adding to job insecurity.

“Increased competition, between countries and businesses, has also ramped up job demands, coupled with stagnant wage growth. All of which, evidence suggests, leads to more bullying and harassment.”

Parker told ATM, “We... realised there was a wider problem than just in our individual schools—this issue is going on all over Australia; we have got members from all over Australia, not just NSW.”

Responsibility lies with federal and state governments, working hand in hand with the teacher unions. The *World Socialist Web Site* has documented the disastrous effects of the Labor initiated right-wing reforms on Australia’s public education system, resulting in the country now having one of the most unequal and privatised school systems in the world.

In 2012, then Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard gave principals increased powers under her “school autonomy” program. This changed relations between school staff.

Previously, senior teachers with decades of experience in a range of schools throughout the state, had considerable authority and usually held the most responsible positions. They were hired by a centralised staffing system and, upon serving a specified number of years in a school, could apply through the central office for a transfer to another school, with little involvement of the school principal.

Gillard’s *Empowering Schools Program*, accompanied by massive school funding cuts, accelerated competition between schools. Principals became transformed into managers implementing a business model that led to increased testing, data collection, and the narrowing of the curriculum. Teachers were required to meet performance targets, promote *their* school through a range of competitive activities, such as fund-raisers, weekend events, advertising and showcasing the superiority of the school in which they were currently employed.

Such a retrogressive educational agenda could not be imposed through the previous norms of democratic discussion and debate, only through bullying, intimidation and the stifling of opposition. Those teachers who disagreed with the so-called reforms, or were less than enthusiastic, could be sidelined and victimised.

Younger teachers, cheaper and without the experience of decades of struggle for working conditions behind them, were increasingly promoted into positions of responsibility. In addition, teacher hire was largely carried out on a local basis, with a principal-approved school panel doing the hiring, while the teacher transfer system was largely dismantled. Teaching positions were more and more tied to a particular school, rather than a state-wide system of schools. Conditions of work, such as compassionate leave and long service leave—regarded as entitlements in the past—were increasingly only available subject to principal approval.

Fewer teachers were hired on a permanent basis and the numbers on

short term contracts rose rapidly. Recent figures show that in Victoria, almost two-thirds of new teachers are now on short term contracts, while the number of NSW teachers working as temporary or casual employees has soared to more than 20 per cent, following the introduction of the state's autonomy model, *Local Schools, Local Decisions*.

Processes to sack permanent teachers were streamlined. Even prior to the introduction of Gillard's school autonomy model, the NSW Teachers Federation vice-president was publicly demanding a faster method of sacking teachers. Union officials entered into negotiations with then Liberal Party education minister, Adrian Piccoli, to beef up the dismissal process. Piccoli thanked the union for its assistance in halving the length of the disciplinary "Teacher Improvement Program" and for giving "more authority" to principals.

The same process has proceeded nationally, with the Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union claiming, in 2017, that the inclusion of a fast-tracked disciplinary process, proposed by the union during its negotiations with the state government, and subsequently embedded in the teachers' enterprise bargaining agreement, was an important gain!

The attack on teachers' working conditions is an international process. Australia has adopted the US and UK model, with a key component being the white-anting of teacher tenure. A report that identified the high cost of teacher turnover in the US—estimated to cost school districts up to \$US2.2 billion annually—resulted in a blunt acknowledgement by school leaders that they liked "employee turnover because we can hire more beginning teachers at a lower salary. We count on it in order to balance the budget."

Victimised teacher, Peter Parker was dismissed in 2016 after being placed on the misnamed Teacher Improvement Program (TIP), one of a number of punitive mechanisms available to school leaders to sack teachers (see: "Australian government-union conspiracy to sack 'underperforming' teachers").

"It was like being in some sort of conspiracy movie, where you are part of a plot of somebody trying to get rid of you, but nobody is being honest about it... It's their method of exiting people they don't want... it's awful, it's very demoralising, it affects your psychological health: you start doubting yourself, you fear, and anxiety and depression come into the picture, and you get isolated..."

Parker and Steele told the ATM that the TIP was being used to remove teachers, "...who cost more to keep in the classrooms. It's about making space for casual, lower-paid young [teachers]."

Interviewed by ATM, NSW Teachers Federation President Maurie Mulheron contemptuously dismissed the BTSN. "Many of them are not teachers... and they have often made outrageous, inaccurate, inflammatory and defamatory comments about people working within the system." The TIP, Mulheron stated, was a formal "negotiated" process, designed to ensure that people were "working to a satisfactory standard."

This is a patent lie, as Nadia Ryan discovered when she appealed her dismissal under TIP in the NSW Industrial Relations Commission (IRC), an exercise that left her over \$100,000 out of pocket. IRC commissioner, Peter Newall, ruled that the outcome of Ryan's TIP "was unfair" and that the school executive had not followed the TIP procedures. Nevertheless, and in a judgement that underscored the extent of principal powers over teachers, these facts did not render Ryan's *dismissal* unfair.

Newall said, "An employed teacher does not have the ability to reject the principal's view of whether or not she needs improvement.

If it is determined that the TIP is necessary, that can be canvassed by, for example, a teacher's union representative. And there is an ability to negotiate the content of the programme. But if a view is formed that a TIP is to be done, then it is to be done."

In other words, the only negotiation that takes place is between the union, who helped devise and police the process, and the education department.

Teachers thus have no rights, either during the TIP or to appeal their dismissal. Newell criticised Ryan's refusal to accept that her guilt, and her determination to prove the allegations against her were unfounded. The entire TIP process is anti-democratic, with teachers having no right to inform their colleagues, with the exception of one support person, who is also bound by the confidentiality clause.

Responding to Mulheron's comment, Ryan told the WSWs: "Negotiated?—this is a true farce. You are presented with a huge list of conditions that often don't make sense. And don't relate to the accusations made. You are bullied and manipulated... the NSWTF gives no guidance and they simply agree with the education department representative and support them.

"You, the teacher, are not backed, and no support in time, regulation or direction is afforded you. You have no idea of the underlying implications and intentions of your accusers and the document you are pushed to sign. There is no intention to improve the teacher; it is a process to remove. Since 2010, when Gillard transferred all the power into the hands of principals, they have used this power in an inequitable manner, playing favourites to those who are their yes-men. They are destroying good and productive teachers, who have the audacity to disagree with their view."

The BTSN teachers' decision to break from the grip of the unions is an important first step, and testimony to their determination to defend hard-fought working conditions and quality public schools. The next step is to recognise that an irreconcilable gulf exists between the teachers, who speak for the working class, on the one hand, and the political establishment—Labor, Liberal, Greens, the unions, which speak for the capitalist class—on the other.

Rather than spending time and energy on fruitless appeals to the powers-that-be, teachers must begin to appeal to their class brothers and sisters throughout Australia and the world, who face the same conditions and are fighting the same battles. Above all, the defence of public education and the working conditions of all workers can only be won in the fight to mobilise the immense social power of the working class against the profit system itself, take power into its own hands and reorganise society in the interests of the vast majority, on the basis of social need, not private profit.

For further information visit the Committee For Public Education Facebook page.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>