

Australia: Regional high school teachers walk out over understaffing and unbearable workloads

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On December 15, more than 20 teachers at the Murrumbidgee Regional High School (MRHS) in New South Wales walked out for the day over chronic problems resulting from a recent merger. Staff reported that many of their colleagues have resigned, workloads have become unbearable, teaching morale is at an all-time low and students are frequently left unsupervised.

MRHS is a government-funded comprehensive secondary school located in Griffith in the Riverina region of NSW. Established through the 2019 merger of Griffith High School and Wade High School, it has approximately 1,250 students enrolled, from year 7 to 12.

Initiated in 2016 by Adrian Piccoli, then education minister and NSW deputy leader of the National Party, the creation of MRHS was part of the broader roll-out of “super schools” introduced by Labor governments and continued by Liberal-National administrations.

This program, which the education unions have done nothing to oppose, has gone hand in hand with funding cuts for public schools, reductions in teacher and staff numbers, the gutting of programs and the selling-off of land.

For Griffith, like many other regional areas, this has had dire consequences.

An interim report into the amalgamation by University of New South Wales (UNSW) academics released last year found the merger left “no clear framework for school leadership” and had led to ‘serious issues with staff well-being.’

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. This 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.

A parent told the WSWs: “My daughter felt there were lots of negatives associated with the merger. The two campuses are about 4 kms apart. My daughter’s subjects were all at one campus, but there were some students in her year group who had classes at the other school site.

“The issue there was that no transport was provided and so parents were having to transport students from one site to the other in the middle of the day which caused issues. Sometimes students couldn’t get from one site to the other, not in time. If they had period one at one site and period two at the other, they couldn’t get there before the lesson commenced. It made it quite difficult for some students! There was quite a bit of animosity among the staff about this situation.”

The amalgamation has also undermined local confidence in the public education system, forcing a growing number of parents to turn to private schools. One primary school teacher reported to the WSWs that “The ability of students transitioning from Year 6 to high school has become more restrictive. As a result, parents have been choosing other options. From the primary school where I teach, we have found that a lot more are choosing to go to the local Catholic high school, or the local Agricultural High schools and other private schools, compared to the past.

“There has been a mass exodus of Year 7 students trying to find placements other than MRHS. There is a pretty strong community feeling that it hasn’t been

successful. A lot of that comes because of the discontent that is so evident amongst the staff.”

In a video of the strike meeting posted on the Facebook page of local MP Helen Dalton, a member of the right-wing Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party, teachers expressed their anger at the situation and put forward the following demands:

- * a four point incentive plan to attract teachers to the area by providing subsidised accommodation

- * the reinstatement of two principals, one for each campus

- * additional release time for teachers to manage working across the two campuses

A motion passed at the strike meeting declaring that teachers would continue their action in 2021. This would include further stoppages and meetings with parents. A petition appealing to the community to support these demands has reportedly received over 1,000 signatures.

While teachers have shown their determination to fight, the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF), the main public school union in the state, has reportedly refused to back their campaign.

Petitioners claimed on Facebook that the union’s president Angelo Gavrielatos is refusing to support or publicize the demands of the teachers. Some have pointed to the record of the NSWTF in imposing amalgamations elsewhere, including in the regional city of Dubbo.

The record underscores the fraudulent character of NSWTF claims to oppose the proposed merger of four schools in the northern NSW town of Murwillumbah. The union is seeking to corral significant anger among teachers there behind the opposition state Labor Party, which initiated the program of school mergers and has spearheaded the pro-business restructuring of education.

In order to take their fight forward, teachers in Murwillumbah and Griffith should link their struggles and make an appeal to other education workers throughout the state and nationally, who are also facing ever-more onerous workloads, increasing casualisation and other attacks on conditions.

This requires a rebellion against the NSWTF, which functions as an industrial police force of governments and the education authorities, isolating teachers and pushing through each new attack.

It also necessitates a rejection of Griffith’s local member Dalton and her Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party.

This right-wing outfit is seeking to exploit the legitimate hostility of teachers to Labor and the union. But its perspective is to pit teachers in regional areas against their colleagues in the major cities, by claiming that issues in Griffith and other towns are the result of the government prioritisation of the major urban centres.

This is a fraud, aimed at dividing teachers, and covering over the fact that the assault on education is occurring everywhere, and is the result of the subordination of education and every other social right to the budget-cutting demands of big business. The Shooters, Fishers and Farmers defend the profit system and have collaborated closely with Liberal-National and Labor governments for years.

Teachers require their own organisations, independent of the unions and all the official parties. That means the establishment of rank-and-file committees, which would unify educators and coordinate a joint industrial and political campaign aimed at defeating the amalgamation drive and ensuring well-paid, full-time jobs and decent conditions for students and staff.

Above all, a new perspective is required, which rejects the dominance of the market over education and defends the right of all to a high-quality public education. That means the fight for a workers’ government, which would implement socialist policies, including placing the banks and the corporations under public ownership, and allocating trillions of dollars to healthcare and education.

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

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