New Teacher Militancy

by Richard Walsham

The offensive by the ruling class against the workers and progressive movements is reflected very much in the attitude of conservative governments in Australia towards education. In New South Wales, the Liberal-Country Party State government has set out to prune back expenditure in education, public transport and other social services. This has been reflected in other states as well. The NSW government has also tried to curb the strength, independence and influence of the teachers' organisation - the NSW Teachers' Federation. Its policies have entailed deliberately creating a pool of unemployed teachers, cutting back on building programs and other areas of education expenditure.

NSW has some 3,000 unemployed teachers. A reactionary offensive is currently being whipped up against progressive developments and advances in education that have developed in the last 8-10 years. There is a fresh attempt to reimpose the old authoritarian relationships, to question teaching methods that brought about more rights for the students in some schools, which projected forms of workers' control in the school situation, which relied more on the real needs of the student and attempted to assert more autonomy at the school level. NSW has, without a doubt, the most authoritarian education system in Australia, yet even the small changes that have come about here have been too much for some of the reactionaries in the Education Department hierarchy and government. Attempts have been made in the media to claim that problems of illiteracy, numeracy and knowledge in basic skills have been brought about, not by traditional methods of education, but by the so-called "permissive" attitudes of teachers and educationists. The attempt is very much on to push back those small yet significant advances that have been made.

It should be stressed that the demands of teachers in the present period are non-economic demands. There is very little action by teachers, certainly in NSW, on the question of salaries. Teachers are concerned about a deterioration in the quality of education available to the students caused by such factors as unemployed teachers, continuance of large class sizes, cutbacks in building programs and other areas.

Teachers are also frustrated by their dual role. They are expected to obey the procedures of the school, to heave the accepted, respectable, middle class mind onto children whatever their background, particular community or interests. The child has to be trained for the examination system. The child and teacher are not allowed to educate each other, they must keep inside the narrow gauge of the syllabus created by others who are called superiors. If they break, they are both labelled failures, misfits.
The teacher is not at school to serve the local community but is contracted as the agent of repression in a social machine out to exploit and mould children to suit the ends of a brutal system which serves the profit-makers. The child is seen statistically as mere raw material to fill up the functions for making profit. The teacher is delegated the job of persuading or coercing the child to sit quietly and contentedly at a job which will give him/her no chance to control his/her own life, only to produce, consume and live “normally”. Unless the teacher is struggling against this political-ideological role, there is no dignity or respect in the teacher’s job.

The teacher-student relationship couldn’t be better expressed than in this poem by a 14-year old London schoolboy:

“Too much class work
Too much home work
Laugh at his jokes
Not at your own
I do not like him
He does not like me
We are both even
Except he has a belt
That is my teacher.”

There has been a dramatic radicalisation of the teaching profession compared with, say, ten years ago. A substantial majority of teachers (60-70 per cent) in our schools today are under the age of 30. They have been impacted and politicised during the Vietnam war period and after. They have quite different attitudes to teaching and to the necessity for militant action than their older colleagues. While not all are this way inclined, a significant proportion are, and it is this section which has had a marked effect in the teacher unions.

The recent dispute at Warilla High School in a working class suburb of Wollongong, where teachers remained on strike for a period of four weeks, ‘marked a watershed in the industrial activities of the Teachers’ Federation. I believe it will lead to a reappraisal of campaigning methods and of how to handle disputes. It was easily the most prolonged strike undertaken by a group of teachers in NSW, and it was characterised by some new and significant features.

The dispute concerned a demand by the staff for the appointment of an additional teacher to the school to reduce class sizes and to provide a numeracy program for the

Warilla High School teachers demonstrate outside Education Department office in Wollongong during month-long strike
children. The teachers argued that the fact that the school was in a Housing Commission area and was classified as disadvantaged necessitated such a program.

The Department adopted an extreme hardline attitude and engaged in strike-breaking, attempts to manipulate the tremendous support coming from the parents, talks to other schools by departmental officers to try to undermine support for the Warilla teachers and an attempt to "ride out" the dispute, hoping to weary the teachers into submission. They also hoped to break the will of the teachers after a number of them, unused to such prolonged and intensive action, succumbed to the pressures and returned to work. In this connection, it's worth noting that the women teachers on the staff were extremely solid - some 80 per cent of the women teachers compared with 40 per cent of the men remained on strike for the full four weeks.

The Federation surrounded the teachers of Warilla with support from other schools both in the form of finance and industrial action. Some $15-20,000 raised enabled all the teachers to be paid strike pay in every week of the dispute. The industrial action included area-wide and school rolling strikes in the Illawarra area and some parts of the metropolitan area.

The really decisive factor, particularly in the closing stages of the dispute, was the support of other workers. Under the leadership of the South Coast Labor Council, the maritime unions took industrial action to hold up the port of Port Kembla while ironworkers, metalworkers and other sections of the trade union movement were mobilised to move into very strong industrial action in support of the teachers. In the final analysis, it was this action, and threat of action, that forced from the Education Department and the State Public Service Board the compromise which led to the return to work by the teachers.

This action also shows the value of trade unions going beyond the immediate issues of wages and conditions and involving themselves in campaigns around quality of life issues such as education.

One would be mistaken in believing that all teachers have been impacted by the need for militant action. One of the features of the struggles this year has been the unevenness of the action taken. In some areas, teachers have not felt impelled to move into action. Conservative ideology, ambition within the promotions system and middle class prejudices all play a role in inducing many teachers into a state of inertia.

The Warilla dispute will have an impact far wider than the teachers of Warilla itself. It will lead to a new approach by teachers in this state towards industrial action. There will be a more determined approach, a preparedness to fight, and fight hard.

There will be a reassessment of the hitherto liberal attitudes to strike-breakers. The one major negative feature at Warilla was the use the Department made of strike-breakers. Lessons have been learnt from this for the future.

With the Liberal government back in the saddle in Canberra, and if the Willis government is returned in NSW, we are in for much sharper conflicts. There will probably be more polarisation among teachers between conservative and militant views and tactics.

The other main tactic that has been promoted this year is the work-in. Teachers have long been frustrated by the knowledge that, though a teachers' strike has a strong ideological effect as witnessed by the near-hysteria from Liberal politicians, it has no economic effect. As a result, more creative forms of action to be taken by teachers have been sought. The scandalous, deliberately-created unemployment problem this year prompted the idea of developing work-in tactics. It is particularly effective in our field because it enables teachers to easily demonstrate that teachers are needed and are available to do necessary and essential work in schools. The Education Department and the State government have reacted very strongly to talk of work-ins.

The best experience has been a situation at Bankstown Girls' High School where an unemployed school counsellor worked-in for two days with the full co-operation of the staff and the principal. The tactics were very carefully worked out in consultation with the staff and the Federation, and the counsellor was given a great deal of work while there. The Federation, in conjunction with the staff, decided to publicise the fact that she was working-in prior to the third day. The Department reacted very strongly, obviously
realising that here was a challenge to their "sacred" right to determine what goes on in schools. It put very heavy pressure on the principal - after all, she hadn't exactly carried out the role expected of her, the Department's agent in the school! Having made the point, it was decided to mobilise the parents and students in support of a campaign around the demand for a permanent school counsellor at Bankstown Girls' High School. This support was keen and enthusiastic but would not have been there if it had not been for the initial work-in tactic which was seen as a bold and constructive initiative.

This brings us to the question of parental support for teacher action. In the past a favorite conservative argument has been that militant action would alienate parent and public support from teachers. Our experience has been that where teachers have taken industrial action, parental and public support has been strongest.

Already mentioned is the fact that the parental support at Warilla was so effective that the Department itself made special efforts to white-ant it in an effort to isolate the teachers. At Bankstown, a record meeting of some 50-60 parents turned up to the normally dormant Parents' and Citizens' Association and gave unanimous support to the action of the teachers.

At Forest Lodge Public School, in a working class inner city suburb, the parents rallied to support teachers who were taking action over the deplorable physical conditions of the school. Here, the teachers invited the parents to visit the school at the time they were actually undertaking the action (minimal supervision). This action opened the parents' eyes to what was going on in the school, led to them taking a very strong stand and gaining considerable publicity which severely embarrassed the Education Minister.

This alliance at a new level will undoubtedly develop if the Fraser government tries to push through its cuts in the education sphere. The Federal Labor government's injection of funds into the schools has helped change the level of expectation of teachers and parents in terms of what sorts of things could be done in the schools given the finance and the ability to have some say over how it is spent. The signs are there that the Liberals are going to make savage cuts in the forthcoming budget and, if they can get away with it, before.

Already, they have displayed their true class position by the attack on the Children's Commission, on pre-school and after-school centres that the Labor government was planning should be funded by the Federal government. Here, children of working class parents are those most affected. It also reinforces the reactionary view that it is the mother's responsibility to take care of the child.

Senator Carrick, Federal Minister for Education, has given out strong indications to the teachers' and parents' bodies that savage cuts are on the way. The Federal government is also seeking to emasculate the Australian Schools Commission under the guise of "federalism". In fact, this policy seeks to strengthen the hand of the state bureaucracies, particularly the unenlightened NSW one. It seeks to tighten up the authoritarian, top-down control that was, to some extent, loosened up under Labor. For instance, the Innovations Program which encouraged teacher-initiative bypassing bureaucracies was the first to be slashed by the Fraser government. Likewise, the in-service and disadvantaged programs are under fire because they, too, entailed direct grants to the grass roots.

To prepare the way for these cuts an effort is being made by sections of the media to question progressive developments in education and to attack teachers. The Murdoch press in particular has decided to highlight crude sensational stories about teachers often on the most trivial subjects while at the same time blacking out reports of serious problems confronting the schools.

I believe that if and when such cuts occur, teachers will react in the strongest terms. The education movement is entering a particularly vigorous period which could lead to some major and very determined struggles by the teachers to both maintain and improve the education system in this country. One of the biggest problems for the left to consider is the need to see this movement not in isolation, but as an integral part of the developing mass movement against the reactionary policies of the Fraser government. In this, there is the great need to develop the widest and most effective support in the workers' movement against attacks that will be made not just on teachers but on the education of working class children.