

TEACHERS' VOICES AND THEIR UNIONS

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Mihajla Gavin et al. address the importance of teacher unions as the collective voice of teachers to counter policies that worsen teacher working conditions and student learning environments...

THE NEOLIBERAL REFORM WAVE IN EDUCATION

Teachers are one of the most highly unionised professions in Australia and globally. This is despite a challenging industrial, political and legal environment marked by repeated attempts to weaken the power of trade unions. Over recent decades, teachers and their unions have felt the impact of 'neoliberal' policies in education. David Harvey describes neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey 2005). Essentially this means pursuing policies which privilege individualism, choice and competition, and see the state as a constraint on this freedom.

In the state of NSW, we have seen such policies manifest in school education over the last 30-odd years. Some key examples include the now-defunct Local Schools Local Decisions devolutionary reform, and school 'dezoning' policies from the 1980s which expanded parental choice. Market-based and competition style policies have had clear impacts on teachers' work. As we have described elsewhere in this suite of articles, and as expanded upon in a recent article (Gavin & Stacey, 2023), despite the promise of devolutionary reform in helping to 'reduce red tape', in fact, the level of bureaucracy and paperwork has worsened in schools. Teachers' workload and work hours have exploded and are considered 'very high' by international standards. Evidence shows teachers have felt a loss of professional respect (Mockler, 2022). And this is while teachers have worked under a decade-long 'cap' on salaries and went to extraordinary lengths to continue students' learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gavin & Stacey, 2022).

TEACHER UNIONS ARE SETTING THE AGENDA

Asserting the voice of teachers against policies that

worsen their conditions and affect public education is important. Unions use a range of tactics and strategies to protect and improve both teachers' working conditions and students' learning environments.

Looking beyond Australia, we've seen vivid examples of teachers being fed up with current policy environments and demanding better conditions and professional respect. In the USA, educators led an historic upsurge in work stoppages in the #RedforEd strikes in 2018-19 (Blanc, 2020). Teachers across mainly Republican-dominated states – some even with bans on public sector strikes – pushed back against austerity and privatisation agendas that were negatively impacting public schools. Educators were successful in winning many key improvements on pay, conditions, and school funding. This activism was mirrored in the NSW Teachers' Federation 'More Than Thanks' campaign where NSW teachers took historic strike action to fight against workload burdens and declining professional salaries.

At other times, other strategies may be more necessary or effective to defend teachers' work and public education. In a chapter looking at changes to professional accreditation in NSW, we examined how governments have used professional standards to hold teachers accountable for the quality of education systems (McGrath-Champ et al., 2020). We explored how the NSW Teachers' Federation used a strategy of 'professional unionism' in working with government and Department to support a standards-based accreditation system at a time when we have seen credentialism and professionalism under threat. An interview with a senior officer for this research described how introducing a standards-based system in NSW would make it "more difficult for governments to come after qualified teachers" and help to prevent a "race to the bottom". This is important given examples witnessed in other countries where lower paid 'teaching assistants' have increasingly replaced the work of teachers.

A great example of this 'professionalisation' strategy has also been building the work of the NSW Teachers' Federation in other areas, such as the Centre for Professional Learning, which helps to provide high-quality training for teachers, as well as this very journal which shares key resources and articles for teachers to enhance their learning across topics. This kind of work by unions is critical and reflects an important way that teachers can build their knowledge and skills about unions and issues in their profession.

Elsewhere, we see examples of unions using evidence from academic research as a platform to campaign for better working conditions for teachers and improvements to public education. In an article on academics collaborating with teacher unions to drive policy impact, we showed how a collaborative research project on teacher workload with the NSW Teachers Federation established an evidence base to draw attention to the work demands on teachers and campaign for better conditions (McGrath-Champ et al., 2022). Unions have also supported influential independent public inquiries into public education, such as the Gallop Inquiry (Gallop et al., 2020).

Another key strategy of teacher unionism has been striving for social justice and equality – not only in public education but across society more broadly. In an article on women-activists' participation in teacher unions, we wrote about the importance of unions advancing gender equality by elevating the voice of women in union decision-making and representation (Gavin et al., 2022). Unions, like the NSW Teachers' Federation, have been forerunners in promoting women's participation in the union through initiatives such as the annual Women's Conference and the Anna Stewart Program. But activism is challenging, and our article highlights a number of strains that women continue to face not only in their union work, but in the labour market and broader society. One union officer for this research explained how 'women still carry the bulk of caring responsibilities, teaching full-time...while balancing teaching and family.' With women now more highly unionised than men in Australia than ever before, striving for the goal of gender equality remains ever important – not only for unions but across the fabric of society.

LET'S CONTINUE TO RAISE TEACHERS' VOICES

Teachers work in one of the world's most important

professions globally, helping to educate and prepare children for their future lives and to be good citizens for a democratic society. But they are working in challenging and increasingly demanding times, marked by a distinct lack of professional respect. Unions play a vital role in continuing to advance and advocate not only for teachers, but for students and public education more broadly.

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