

NSW Teachers Federation Council buries motion on Assange – a symptom of bureaucratic decline.

by Pietro Mascetti

The NSW Teachers Federation had its Council Meeting on March 14, 2020 in Sydney where it made pronouncements and recommendations on a number of issues that affect education in NSW and beyond. The motivation for this writer to attend was the passing of two motions in different NSWTF Associations. In February, two identical motions were passed at the Hills District Association and the Illawarra Teachers Association that demanded the Federal Government intervene directly to ensure the safe return of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange, to Australia. It was hoped that the same motion would be passed by the Federation's Council.

The Council Conference begins its business at 9am with an agenda that touches on many topics which impact on teachers' conditions and the state of education for students in the public-school system in New South Wales. This observer witnessed the deliberations of the Council and could only conclude that this organisation is not the vehicle for defence of education and teachers' conditions.

Bureaucratic methods tend to be very effective tools in ensuring that some issues are never discussed and the politics of the establishment (in this case the NSWTF) exert a very strong bias for some issues and a conversely, a very strong

bias against others.

The motion demanding Assange's freedom made it to the document entitled "Motions From Associations", however it failed to make it to the list of debated and discussed motions. It garnered 16 votes from councillors but other motions received substantially more and therefore it was placed 10th position in a list of 14 and was never discussed. As it turned out, only 4 motions were discussed, debated and adopted.

While all of the issues that were raised in Motions from Associations have great importance and warrant, all of these exist in a context that is framed by the ongoing persecution and prosecution of Julian Assange, journalist and publisher. Defence of Julian Assange is defence of knowledge, publishing, journalism, information and education. Educators rely on transparent journalism, honest, courageous and reliable reporters and whistleblowers. But the failure of the Federation to promote either in the public domain or in its conference agendas, the case of Julian Assange, despite the growing support for the campaign as evidenced by the two recent Association motions, confirms that it is an organisation committed to the transmission of government attacks on teachers and the working class including the presentation of the truth to us all

The content of the other major motions discussed at the meeting bore out this political truth. One of the key items on the agenda, was a report on *Deepening Membership, Community and Political Engagement*, delivered by Angelo Gavrielatos, President of the NSWTF. He identified a decline in membership and more importantly, a decline in density of Federation members at schools across the state, as of a major concern for

the long-term viability of the union. Federation membership shrunk between December 2019 and February 2020 by 2.3%, declining from over 60 000 to just over 59 000 over that two-month interval. There is no doubt that historical trends on union coverage in schools, what the Federation calls "density" has been in decline for years now. However, if Gavrielatos and the Federation were looking to reverse this trend, judging by the level of discussion and the resolutions adopted at the council, this downward trend will continue.

A case in point is the report and discussion which occurred over a latest attack on Education and teaching by the leader of the NSW One Nation Party, Mark Latham. You may remember him as the former leader of the Australian Labor Party and once upon a time, Education Spokesman for Labor on Education. He has authored a report that can only be described as an assault on teachers, public education and the students who attend those schools. Some of the more egregious elements of Latham's attack on public education include publishing "league tables" of school test results, paying teachers' salaries based on student performance and setting prescribed targets for schools set by politicians and bureaucrats.

But the irony is that the Federation, in actions more than words, has been complicit with Labor and Liberal governments in implementing such attacks on teachers over the last ten years at least. For example, in 2012, the Federation agreed with the Government to implement a Local Schools Local Decisions framework for public schools in New South Wales. One of the implications for such a framework was that adequately staffing schools was removed from the central authority to individual schools. Principals were able to determine who was employed at the school which made the process susceptible to favouritism and other forms of discrimination. Local Schools Local Decisions' central goal was to reduce the expenditures

on teachers' salaries and increase the proportion of casual and temporary teachers who work in the public system. But the Federation agreed to this back in 2012. Today, many schools are staffed by casual teachers who do not seek to "rock the boat" for fear of losing their job. But one thing is clear, tenure as it existed, no longer exists to the extent that previous generations enjoyed. Latham's attack is just an extension of what Federation has agreed with the Department.

None of these arguments were made by the mover of the motion, Amber Flohm. In fact, when an amendment to the motion was made, calling for a ban on NAPLAN, she rejected it, claiming, "It is not helpful to have a side debate on NAPLAN".

But if one were seeking to meet the needs of teachers, to increase the participation of teachers in the Federation,, one would reasonably claim that NAPLAN should be banned, because it is allowing a tool to be used to further attack education and teachers' salaries, for which Latham's Report is just the latest attempt.

It should also be noted that Latham was a member of the Australian Labor Party. This is important in this context because, Geoff Gallop, former Western Australia Labor Premier, was invited to address the Federation because the latter has set up what is known as the Independent Inquiry into Teaching. Remember that Gallop and Latham were part of the same political party, only a decade or so ago. To have a former Labor Premier, address the Federation Council, is the height of hypocrisy, given that Labor has been central to the attacks on education for more than 30 years. However, I doubt that such reflections are taking place in the corridors of the Federation, given that it has been the vehicle for transmitting the attacks teachers' conditions and public

education. The irony is that such attacks have been the reason why so many teachers have left the union and are unlikely to ever return.

In light of the failure of the NSW Federation Teachers Council to debate the motion on Assange is not the end of the campaign to organise teachers in his defence. The motions by the Illawara and Hills District Association should be catalyst for other Associations to move similar motions. Teachers in Melbourne have also moved motions calling for the defence of Assange. The fight to defend teachers industrially cannot be separated from the broader political struggle to defend the rights of the working class.