

Contracting OUT

PENNY CAROSI examines what has happened to NSW AMES since 1998.

On a 7.30 Report program, titled 'Contracting Out', in 1998, the then Minister for Immigration, Multicultural and Aboriginal Affairs, Philip Ruddock, explained his decision to contract out the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP).

In specific reference to the AMEP in New South Wales, where his department had given the majority of funding to a private consortium, he acknowledged that NSW AMES had a very good reputation for tuition spanning 50 years. He said the issue however, was about reducing the cost to the taxpayer. As a result of the tendering process, 500 highly skilled and experienced AMES teachers lost their jobs. Some moved to the public school and TAFE systems and others moved to private English language providers. None of the private providers have salaries and working conditions for teachers that equal those in AMES.

In 2001, the Australian National Audit Office looked at the costs of the AMEP before and after the contracting out. The report produced shows that the program had become more expensive per student hour of tuition and that students were receiving fewer hours of tuition.

Armed with this information, the remaining 150 AMES teachers decided to lobby the Federal Opposition prior to the 2001 election to seek a commitment to no further tendering of the AMEP if and when they came to Government.

The relevant Shadow Ministers, Sciacca, Lee and Kernot (remember them?) agreed that the

NSW AMES Teachers Association delegation had a strong case against continued tendering of the AMEP. The moral panic fuelled by the Howard government around the 2001 election resulted in its return to power and subsequently even greater financial pressure was brought to bear on AMEP providers. The risk associated with infrastructure provision for unknown numbers of students was shifted from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs to the providers.

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In the last round of tenders decided in 2002, NSW AMES formed a consortium with NSW TAFE Institutes and Adult and Community Education (ACE) Colleges and this Consortium won back some of the funding that had previously gone to the private consortium.

The AMES Teacher Association members have always spoken out strongly on behalf of their students and in support of those migrants and refugees who remain in need due to Federal government constraints. Through the NSW Teachers Federation, they have successfully resisted the downward pressure on their salaries and working conditions. The NSW government has tried to break the nexus between AMES teachers and their school and TAFE colleagues on the basis that AMES is in a competitive environment. Through the AMES

Award, the Federation is currently a strategic partner with NSW AMES with agreed changes being implemented without attacks on salaries and conditions.

Most AMES teachers are five year trained with a minimum of four years. All AMEP teachers must be fully qualified. In the private consortium, lower pay and conditions do not result in a lower cost to government, but rather greater profits to the private provider.

In 2004/5, the Federation has sought to improve the pay and conditions of AMEP teachers outside of AMES and TAFE. For example, the Federation jointly with the Independent Education Union took a case to the NSW Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) to increase the salaries of AMEP teachers in ACE Colleges commensurate with those of AMES teachers. The IRC awarded the unions' claim. While this is a significant victory, as the salary increases awarded were between 30 per cent and 60 per cent, the effect may be short lived if the Coalition's industrial relations agenda is not defeated.

Federation members in NSW AMES have first hand experience of the Howard government's ideology of all power through funding requirements, but no responsibility for provision. They will continue with their considerable activism to join with TAFE and school colleagues and other union comrades in the industrial relations battle ahead for us all. ❖



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