

Australia:

State Labor government seeks to overturn teachers' conditions

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16 November 1999

The Carr Labor Party government in New South Wales has unveiled a new award that would overturn fundamental working conditions for the state's 80,000 government primary, secondary and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers. Teachers have voted overwhelmingly to strike for 24 hours on November 18 against it.

The proposed award is unprecedented. It removes minimal conditions for teachers and goes far beyond the measures adopted by the Kennett Liberal Party government in its attacks on public education in the neighbouring state of Victoria.

Under the award:

* Teachers' hours of attendance would be anywhere between 7 am and 10 pm, Monday to Saturday—a radical extension of previous normal hours, which are usually 9 am to 3.30 pm, Monday to Friday. Teachers could also be directed to work on Sundays, with each hour counting as two. Annualised hours would be introduced, so that full-time teachers must work 1,435 hours per year, of which 900 hours would be classroom teaching. This would increase teaching hours for secondary and TAFE teachers by almost five hours per week and for primary teachers almost three hours. The longer hours would mean substantial job losses.

* Each teacher's working hours would be determined "in consultation between the employee and the principal, district superintendent or institute director". Instead of a common weekly teaching load, the hours and the times of work would be subject to worksite arrangements, breaking up solidarity between teachers. Teachers could be employed on a contractual basis to work longer hours, to be paid from their school's global budget.

* Instead of being open 203 days (40 weeks) schools and TAFE campuses would remain open for 50 weeks a year with only a two-week shutdown over Christmas. This would put immediate pressure on teachers' vacation times. Vacation leave, now 11 weeks, would be divided into four weeks "annual leave" for the majority of teachers, with the remaining seven weeks defined as "agreed non-attendance". This time could be traded off according to the competition needs of each school. Certain categories of school employees, including principals, counsellors and career advisers, would have their annual leave entitlement cut by four weeks immediately.

* The long established practice of salaries being determined by a teacher's qualifications, automatically going up for each year of service, would be eliminated. Progression up the pay scale would depend upon a teacher passing an annual performance review, opening the way to nepotism and victimisation.

* The Education Department's director-general would have the power to determine who qualifies as a teacher. This would remove all definitions based on years of training and qualification standards, paving the way for untrained employees to be employed as teachers. As a first step, principals, counsellors and others not directly engaged in face to face teaching would no longer be teachers but "professional officers".

* Employees of schools and TAFE colleges considered supernumerary at one institution could be directed to work at any other.

* Individual contracts would be introduced for principals of large schools and TAFE institute managers, opening the way to extend contracts to other staff.

In an accompanying document, headed "Why schools and TAFE need this new award", Education Department chief Dr Ken Boston warned that the survival of NSW public education depended on its ability to become "more competitive" in the education market.

He said increased government funding of private schools and a relative decline in enrolment numbers in government schools made the environment "fully contestable". Boston revealed that more than 70 percent of private schools would receive more than 75 per cent of their funds from the government, enough to pay for the full cost of teacher salaries.

Turning then to TAFE colleges, Boston cited figures showing that NSW TAFE was "clearly inefficient in comparison with other states". Its "net cost per annual contact hours of \$15.20" compared unfavourably with those of "our major competitor, Victoria (\$10.30)".

The NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF), the trade union covering both school and TAFE teachers, described the award as "an attack on teachers the like of which has not been seen" and labelled it "a bad joke". Yet the award follows the direction taken by both federal and state governments to progressively abandon responsibility for the provision of education and to reorganise it along the lines of the capitalist market.

A decade ago the NSWTF allowed global budgetting, which makes individual schools, not the government, responsible for making ends meet. As a result, teachers have suffered increased workloads and the erosion of pay and conditions. And the gap has widened between cash-strapped public schools in poorer areas and those in affluent regions, where corporate sponsorship and parents' donations are greater. The notion of a unified public school system providing a free education to all has given way to a struggle for the survival of the fittest, with schools competing against each other for enrolments and scarce funding.

Already, since 1991 the NSWTF has allowed the state government to force TAFE teachers to compete with private contractors to run classes. As a result, 800 TAFE jobs have been cut, with another 630 due to be axed. Over the past three years, \$400 million has been cut from TAFE NSW budgets, with lower paid part-time teachers replacing full-time teachers. "Facilitators"—often without teacher training—have been taking on teachers' duties.

Teachers in the Adult Migrant English Service (AMES) face similar attacks. In 1992 a federal Labor government pushed AMES into the tendering process, unimpeded by the union. Within a few years, AMES had lost two-thirds of its courses to a private contractor whose staff work longer hours on a casual basis, are paid \$4,000 less per annum and have five weeks fewer holidays.

The launching of the award, in addition, signals a shift in the relationship between the government and the union. Instead of negotiating a deal with the union, Boston posted the award on the Internet and sent each teacher a copy. This is a step toward bypassing the union and coercing teachers into signing individual contracts.

At the same time, the government has unilaterally imposed two measures that were left unresolved from the previous award, which expired in June. One streamlines the dismissal of teachers termed "inefficient" and the other introduces a new procedure for measuring a school's performance.



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