

Australian teachers oppose worsening conditions in new NSW award

Erika Zimmer
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About 25,000 New South Wales school teachers, parents and students rallied outside the state parliament in Sydney on November 18 during a 24-hour strike against a new teachers' award unveiled by the Labor Party government. Teachers are demanding a complete withdrawal of the award.

The rally was the largest mounted by NSW school and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers since 1988 when 100,000 parents, teachers and students protested against the former state Liberal government's moves to cut 2,000 teaching jobs and shift responsibility for school funding from the government onto individual schools.

The proposed new award includes an increase in teaching time by up to five hours a week; an extension of school hours to 7am to 10pm Monday to Saturday, 50 weeks a year; the introduction of individual contracts; and mechanisms by which untrained staff could be employed as teachers.

In exchange, teachers would get pay adjustments, which in some instances do not even cover inflation increases—rises of between 6 percent and 9 percent over four years. TAFE teachers and casual relief teachers would have their pay cut.

Teachers, some travelling hundreds of kilometres, attended the rally holding placards expressing their outrage over the terms of the award and their hostility to Premier Bob Carr, Education Minister John Aquilina and Education Department head Dr Ken Boston.

Banners read: "Exploitation is not reform", "7am—10pm new school hours", "Trained teachers only for our schools" and "Aquilina proposes A warD". Others proclaimed: "Respect qualifications, no paraprofessionals", "In your dreams Aquilina" and "Public education = Carr's carnage". Others were even more blunt: "0.2% + 5 hours work, no thanks" and "we

want real negotiations, sack Aquilina and Boston".

Speakers from the Teachers Federation were cheered when they called for the sacking of Aquilina and Boston. Teachers chanted, "sack him" and "he must go". When one speaker referred to Aquilina's comment before the state election in March this year that teachers would "lynch" him if he offered a pay rise lower than the rate of inflation, teachers chanted "get the rope" and "lynch him".

Acting Labor Council secretary John Robertson got loud applause and cheers outside the gates of parliament house when he said that while Aquilina had presented the teachers as the villains, the "real villains were on the other side of the fence." Teachers hurled thousands of copies of the new award over the fence and into forecourt. Some copies were set alight.

However, the union has not called follow-up statewide strikes, nor has the Labor Council suggested that workers in other unions mobilise in support of the teachers. Instead, as the Teachers Federation did in 1988, it is counting on a series of two-hour work stoppages over the next two weeks to dissipate and wear down the movement.

At this point, the union leaders are refusing Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) directives to call off further industrial action and begin compulsory arbitration on the new award. However, the IRC intervention has given the union officials a pretext to end the dispute in the IRC as the campaign wanes.

Despite a general Education Department ban on public comment, teachers at some school are attempting to make the true facts of their situation known and win the support of parents at their schools.

At Colyton primary school in Sydney's western suburbs, the teachers wrote an open letter to parents, saying: "This strike is not just about giving teachers

more money. It is about the future of Public Education in NSW and about ensuring quality education for your children...

"Open schools from 7am until 10pm including Saturdays. Your children may have to attend school at these times! Imagine having children attend school in 'shifts'—one child starting at 7am and another finishing at 10pm!..

"Children taught by unqualified teachers...Why? To save the government money!...

"Which areas will be hit hardest? Areas like Colyton will suffer the most! With such poor pay and conditions on offer there will be no incentive to start teacher training, so your children will pay the price for a government that thinks education can be reduced to just dollars and cents. Do your children mean just dollars and cents to you?...

"Education is not a 'business' and cannot be treated in these terms. If we don't act, your children will pay a terrible price."

The Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of NSW, representing 2,100 parents groups, has supported the teachers and condemned the award. Its president Bev Baker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, that the award would have a "massive effect" on public education and was designed to save the government money.

"Instead of building a new school, one building could be used to teach students in shifts." Teachers, regardless of their field of expertise could be directed to "teach anywhere, anytime" at primary schools, high schools or TAFE colleges.

"Far reaching ramifications" would result from conditions in the award, which allowed people without qualifications to work as teachers. TAFE colleges, already hard hit by being forced to tender with private providers, would be further decimated.

The media has sought to characterise the teachers' campaign as a salaries issue. Murdoch's *Sydney Daily Telegraph* began with a front-page headline: "Teacher pay rise. \$93 a week offer over 4 years". It was calculated to whip up public opinion against the teachers and pressure them to quickly end the strike. (Only teachers at the top of the pay scale would get this sum, in exchange for taking on additional responsibilities.)

Both the media and the government have been able to

restrict public discussion on the real issues in the campaign because the Teachers Federation has maintained a silence on the government's underlying agenda, which is to make schools compete with each other, and with wealthier private schools, by extending class hours and cutting salary costs.

The union has not challenged Boston's demand that NSW TAFE teachers, paid \$15.20 per hour, match their "major competitors", their counterparts in the adjoining state of Victoria, who have had their annual contact hour costs cut back to \$10.30 per hour.

Nor has the union made any attempt to draw attention to the massive funding increases afforded to private schools. (In a document accompanying the new award, Boston revealed that 70 percent of private schools would receive 75 percent of their funding from governments.)

In a *Sydney Morning Herald* comment on the teachers' mass rally, education reporter Gerard Noonan said the Education Department and the union had a common interest in ending the dispute. "Despite the noisy claims" the union leaders were unlikely to call for another full-day strike and the two-hour stoppages were "only of irritant value". Behind the battle cries, he observed, "listen carefully for the sound of the hard-heads on both sides looking for a way of getting out of this mess."



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