

# Australia: The NSW teachers' dispute

## Parents, teachers and principals deepen their opposition to education cutbacks

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Since New South Wales (NSW) teacher union leaders called off strike action two weeks ago and entered into discussions with the state Labor government over a new teachers' award, indications of parent and teacher opposition to education cutbacks have begun to emerge outside the framework of the official negotiations.

For months NSW public school and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers have been locked in an increasingly bitter struggle with the Carr government and its education department. The new award the government is trying to implement makes further substantial cutbacks to public schools and colleges, as well as undermining teachers' working conditions.

The award includes a radical extension of school opening hours—7am to 10pm Monday to Saturday, 50 weeks a year. It increases teaching time by up to 5 hours a week and introduces annualised hours for teachers. The award opens the way for untrained staff to be employed as teachers and introduces individual contracts—at this point only for school principals. The NSW government is insisting on "flexible" working conditions for public school and TAFE teachers so that the institutions can "compete in the educational market place".

A 24-hour strike and a series of rolling stoppages before the long school holiday break in January was followed by teachers overwhelmingly supporting a further 24-hour strike at a stopwork meeting held on February 3, in the first week of the new school year.

However, while teachers showed their willingness to continue the fight—with some meetings calling for an extension of strike action or even indefinite stoppages—leaders of the NSW Teachers Federation struck a deal with the Carr government to call off all industrial action and enter into a six-week period of discussions with the education department.

The union officials claimed that progress had been made

in the dispute, with the government making a revised pay offer and agreeing to set the award aside for the duration of the talks. In reality, the original salary offer of 9.6 percent over four years was lifted to 16 percent, but only 10 percent is funded, the remaining 6 percent to come from "productivity increases". Further, none of the award's far-reaching attacks that have so outraged teachers, have been ruled out of the negotiations. This has left teachers angry and skeptical about the union backdown. And parents are joining them in this.

The peak NSW school parents' body, the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations, has taken the unprecedented step of launching court action to intervene in the teachers' dispute, lodging a Notice of Motion in the Industrial Relations Commission earlier this month.

Concerned that a backroom deal between the union and the government will worsen conditions in public schools, the Federation commented, "We have never forgotten, nor forgiven the 1996 salary tradeoffs, which cost us \$10 million from school global budgets, access to the professional development programs and loss of student support services across the State."

In the last pay claim in 1996, the union and the Carr government came to an agreement that cut \$55 million from school expenditures, increasing class sizes and eliminating hundreds of teaching jobs. The danger that another rotten deal is being worked out is evidenced by the union's reference to the dispute as simply one over salaries. This is a signal that it has no intention of launching a challenge to the government's offensive against public education.

The parent group is now claiming the right of direct participation in the dispute, whether it ends up in the courts or is decided in negotiation. One of its press releases objects to a process where "matters directly affecting the learning conditions of students, such as

school opening times, the qualification of people in classrooms, and who will teach what courses, are to be decided between employer and employee only".

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Federation president Bev Baker said the new teachers' award was aimed at the "destruction of a 150-year-old history, which has required, since 1848, that all teachers have a qualification". The award, she said, "subjected teachers to humiliating work practices" which "reduced professionals to the level of a labourer, teachers being told how to work and when to work" and treating them "like shift workers. Teachers would have to work whenever the boss deemed they work."

Baker explained that there was nothing in the award to protect teachers from working split shifts. "A school could be opened in two shifts from 7am to 1pm and from 3pm to 10pm with a teacher being told to work three hours in the first shift and three hours in the later shift." Parents could simply be told that their kids were enrolled in either the morning or the afternoon shift.

In a prepared statement, Baker declared, "It's becoming all too frequent that controversial changes and cuts to public sector services are made within industrial awards thus preventing public comment and denying representative community organisations any chance to be heard. We are determined that this will not happen to public education. We have applied to the Industrial Relations Commission to intervene and express parents' concerns about the radical and alarming conditions in the Government's proposed award, the teachers' response to it and the exclusion of parent and student views."

The Federation's attempt to become involved was rejected by the Industrial Relations Commission and opposed by NSW Education Minister John Aquilina, who arrogantly declared that parents' only concern was to see the end of school strikes.

At the same time, NSW school principals have denounced the education minister for his action last month in publishing details of the bank accounts of every public school in the state. The government released the information to encourage parents to conclude that schools had substantial funds at their disposal. Principals have issued a press release "strongly condemning" as a "calculated act of treachery" this information which "unfairly and inaccurately portrays schools as hoarding money".

"The greatest victims of the release of this information without explanation," the statement continues, "are the Public Schools of our state. Many of them experience a

loss of revenue when the amount of voluntary contributions and other community support drops because public opinion is falsely influenced into believing that schools have large amounts of money. Many schools in 1999 experienced drops of between 10 percent and 50 percent in voluntary contributions" [after Aquilina published bank account details in July 1999].

The NSW Primary Principals Association and the NSW Secondary Principals Association have voted to boycott "participation in any ceremonial process requested by the Minister or any Ministry Staff".

The moves of both the parents' organisation and the school principals have been ignored in the media. Both the media and the government, however, lost no time in mounting a strident campaign last week against NSW state school teachers for banning annual language and literacy tests for students in Years 7 and 8.

While union officials have declared that the ban is a separate issue, a highly significant 90 percent of teachers across the state refused to conduct the English Language Literacy Assessment tests. The results are used to reduce the number of special support teachers in schools. If school performance in the tests improves, the government then argues that this "proves" that specialist teachers are no longer warranted.

As a teacher from Cessnock, a rural mining town, wrote in one of a number of letters to the media in support of the ban: "In my school of about 1,000 students, there are whole classes of students needing specialised remedial help. Yet this school is seen as 'average'... the real need is for extra support teachers in our schools, not shifting resources around between schools, which is shamefully reminiscent of shifting the deckchairs on the Titanic."

Premier Bob Carr has threatened to fine the union \$10,000 and \$5,000 for every day the union defied a court order directing the tests to go ahead. Newspaper editorials called for the union to be deregistered. The fact that teachers overwhelmingly supported the ban, in defiance of these threats, indicates the depth of feeling developing against the government and its measures.



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