

Australia:

Union leaders prepare to betray teachers' fight against new award

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After calling off strike action and entering into eight-week-long talks with the Carr state Labor government over a new award for New South Wales teachers, the NSW Teachers Federation is preparing to push through a settlement that would implement many of the key provisions originally demanded by the government.

Last November the government unveiled a new award for government school and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers that overturned fundamental conditions. For example, it required schools and TAFE colleges to operate extended hours—7am to 10 pm Monday to Saturday; deregulated teacher qualifications; and imposed annual performance reviews. Teachers' working conditions had to be made flexible, the government insisted, in order for schools to become “competitive in the education market place”.

In response, teachers called a 24-hour strike. Some 25,000 teachers, students and parents rallied outside the NSW state parliament, mounting the largest education protest in more than a decade and demanding a complete withdrawal of the government's award. A series of rolling stoppages followed, with teachers voting overwhelmingly for further strike action when the new school year began in February. Union leaders called off the industrial action, however, and began protracted talks with the government.

Last Saturday the union executive called a special council meeting to rubberstamp its recommendation that a government offer, dated April 7, be “the framework for a political settlement”. While claiming to reject the offer, the recommendation embraces the possibility that the dispute will be settled before Friday when a stopwork meeting of teachers is scheduled.

The government's offer differs little from its original

award. In exchange for a 16 percent pay increase over four years it demands:

* A “flexible range of teaching hours for secondary schools”. In place of the traditional school hours of 9 am to 3.30 pm, Year 11 and 12 teachers—around 30 percent of high school staff—could be timetabled to work between 7.30 am and 5.30 pm. Other teachers could be timetabled “with their agreement” to work “beyond the normal hours of operation”. These extended hours may initially be limited to running vocational courses but they would establish a beachhead to be used to extend flexible hours to all school subjects.

* That teachers become “portable.” Teachers would no longer work at one school or TAFE college but “may be programmed to teach in more than one location,” meaning teachers could be directed to work at a number of schools or institutions within one week or even a single day. School teachers could be “programmed” to work at TAFE colleges, and TAFE teachers at schools.

* The introduction of the category of “fixed term teacher” in both schools and TAFE colleges. A fixed term teacher would be employed full time for “one term or more with no expectation of employment beyond the expiry of the period of employment”. In other words, a contract system would be introduced to undermine the salaries and conditions of permanent teachers.

* A “strengthened teacher assessment review process” that teachers would have to undergo annually in order to keep their jobs and progress up the salary scale.

* Teaching hours for TAFE teachers be increased by

5 hours per week to 24 direct teaching hours per week, in order to “meet the imperatives of the competitive environment”. This would maintain the increase in TAFE teachers' hours set out in the award proposed last November.

Various political groups are hailing the government offer as a victory for teachers. An article in the International Socialist Organisation's newspaper *Socialist Worker* headed, “NSW teachers force state Labor backdown,” said teachers had “scored a major win”. A leaflet distributed outside Saturday's council meeting by POPE (Promotion of Public Education), which is supported by the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia, congratulated “the Federation negotiating team” for its “many achievements thus far, not the least of which is the utter removal of Boston's repugnant award”.

The reality is that while the government has been forced to back away from its original method of approach—which attempted to bypass the union by posting the award directly to teachers—the union has stepped into the breach and reinforced its role as the instrument through which the government's requirements are met.

In its recommendation to Saturday's council meeting, the union executive drew attention to “the extent of educational change and addition to workload which is already being borne by teachers.” The union has implemented all of this. In fact, in the last award negotiated in 1996 the union agreed to trade off a small pay rise for severe cutbacks in the number of specialist teachers and services.

Teachers' opposition to the government's proposed award has been consistent since November despite an ongoing campaign in the media. It has reported the dispute as being simply over higher salaries and portrayed teachers as self-interested, blocking the way to much-needed educational “reform.” The attempts to whip up public sentiment against teachers have, however, fallen flat.

If the government and the union officials succeed in imposing their proposed “political settlement” it will open the floodgates. From the outset, the government's award aimed at introducing a new regime in the state's public schools—all in the name of competing with the private sector—unrestricted hours, casualisation and wage-cutting, as well as punitive “review” measures

that can be used to target any teachers opposing these conditions. The looming union-government deal is a major step along this road.



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