

Australia:

Teachers vote to strike but union prepares for a deal

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New South Wales state school teachers voted overwhelmingly last Friday to reject the Carr Labor government's latest award offer, but the government is not backing away from any of its sweeping demands and the teachers' union is working to deliver its key requirements.

At Friday's two-hour stoppage teachers voted by almost 20,000 to 800 to support the union recommendation for a possible 24-hour strike when schools resume after a two-week holiday and for the union executive to draw up plans for rolling stoppages.

Teachers met at separate venues so there was no opportunity for alternative resolutions to be considered by the entire membership. By all accounts, however, the feeling at most meetings was not only anger against the government but also against the union.

At one meeting in Sydney, attended by some 3,000 teachers, a school principal denounced the union leaders and called for a 48-hour strike. This was only narrowly defeated. At another meeting, in Sydney's western suburbs, while a call to strike for 48 hours was defeated after being opposed by the union organiser, a motion to ban testing was passed, despite its rejection by the organiser.

For months the media, the government and union leaders have connived to isolate and attack teachers by referring to the dispute as a salaries issue and therefore of little concern to parents and other working people. Teachers' opposition to the new award has not abated, however. The government is still demanding "flexible" working conditions, including extended school hours, teachers to be timetabled at a variety of locations, and punitive annual reviews of teacher performance.

One teacher, speaking on radio before Friday's vote, expressed a typical view. He said the dispute had nothing to do with money. He and his wife, both teachers, would

not care if the government doubled its salary offer. The dispute was about conditions and he did not know who was worse—the government or the union—in covering that fact up.

Widespread teacher opposition to a reported settlement between the union and the government caused a last minute back-flip by the union executive at Friday's meeting. In the week leading up to the meeting there was every indication that the executive was close to a sell-out after nine weeks of negotiations. The union's 300-member council had endorsed the executive's recommendation that the government's latest offer, which retained many of the original demands, provided the "framework for a political settlement".

The media predicted an end to the dispute and NSW Labor Council secretary Michael Costa, familiar with the closed-door talks, said negotiations were "fairly close". After the deal's collapse, Premier Bob Carr said he was "astonished" by the union executive's about-face.

The union leaders' somersault has nothing to do with opposition to the government's demands nor does it signal a genuine fight, but shows their difficulties in pushing the changes through at this point.

In fact, the wording of the official recommendation at Friday's meeting confirms that the union has embraced the government's demands. For example, it does not oppose extended school hours in principle but calls for "agreement" between individual teachers and their employers. It emphasises "the need for teacher agreement associated with working outside the normal span of hours of school".

Such clauses are a common mechanism through which cuts to working conditions have been imposed on teachers. Teachers Federation president Sue Simpson acknowledged as much in her broadcast to Friday's

meeting. There were “no examples where ‘by teacher agreement’ clauses have stifled change,” she said.

Similarly, the union recommendation does not rule out teachers being forced to move from school to school, or from school to Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college. Instead, it proposes negotiations around “the circumstances under which TAFE teachers could teach in schools and school teachers could teach in TAFE”. Simpson has already declared that “portability is long-standing union policy”.

As for the government's demands that TAFE teachers work additional hours and undertake a heavier workload, union senior vice president Maree O'Halloran said on Friday this was agreed “if it is required”.

The issue is: “required” by whom? Education Department chief Ken Boston has made it clear from the outset that the new award must establish the conditions for government school teachers to compete with the private operators in the education marketplace. This marketplace requires unending cost-cutting and the destruction of teachers' conditions, cutting completely across education requirements.

Last Friday's union recommendation also confirms that the union leadership has no basic difference with this perspective. Its second paragraph points to “the extent of educational change and additions to workload which are already being borne by teachers”. The union has enforced all these changes.

Following the collapse of the deal between the union and the government, Carr ruled out further talks, immediately returning the dispute to the Industrial Relations Commission. This is a long-established method by which employers' demands are imposed by law, with union leaders saying they have no choice other than to abide by the court's decisions.



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