

Australia:

Teachers' union agrees to sellout deal with NSW Labor government

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After almost a year of conflict between New South Wales teachers and the Carr state government over a new industrial award, the teachers' union executive has agreed to a settlement containing the government's main demands for "flexible" working conditions.

Exercising a mandate provided by stopwork meetings last month, the union executive last week unanimously accepted the deal. Despite being presented in the media as all sewn-up, however, the agreement has yet to be endorsed by teachers. Mass meetings will be held this Friday to vote on the new package.

Last October, four months after the previous award expired, the Labor government unveiled a new award which sought to overturn fundamental working conditions for the state's 60,000 public primary, secondary and technical college teachers. The government demanded teachers' working conditions be "freed" from restrictions so that public education could "complete in the education market place".

Despite a determined and bitter struggle by teachers, including strikes, rolling stoppages and bans, the terms of the latest settlement demonstrate a wholesale sellout by the NSW Teachers Federation over the most critical issues. In exchange for pay increases of between 3 to 5 percent annually over three years—little more than the rate of inflation—the deal includes:

* **The extension of school opening hours.** Instead of the traditional school hours of 9 am to 3.30 pm, Year 11 and Year 12 teachers—up to a third of high school staff—can be timetabled to work between 7.30 am and 5.30 pm. Having established the principle that extended school hours are necessary "to enhance curriculum opportunities" for senior students, it would be only a matter of time before extended hours were introduced for all teachers.

Portability". Teachers will no longer work at one school or Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college, but can be directed to teach "in more than one location". TAFE teachers can be sent to work at schools; school teachers to work at TAFE colleges. Working hours for school teachers directed to teach at a TAFE college can, "by agreement," be further extended beyond 5.30 pm.

* **A "strengthened teacher assessment review process"**. Teachers will have to undergo testing annually in order to keep their jobs and to progress up the salary scale. Coming on top of increased workloads and hours previously agreed to by the union, and higher levels of stress, this measure will give principals stronger powers to make demands on teachers, and further open the way for individual teachers to be isolated and victimised.

* **The introduction of a category of "temporary teacher."** Staff vacancies will only have to be filled by permanent teachers "where reasonably practicable". Similar provisions have resulted in more than 50 percent of permanent full-time teachers in the TAFE system being replaced by casuals, whose hiring costs are 50 percent less. The ratio of full-time to casual teachers in some TAFE college departments is as low as 20:80.

* Obviously relieved, Education Minister John Aquilina jubilantly hailed the settlement in state parliament as a victory. "The agreement has been arrived at in the way I always anticipated—through negotiation," he crowed.

Union president Sue Simpson was reported to be more subdued. She remarked that the relationship between the union and the government had been damaged, but added: "No relationships are damaged beyond repair. We believe this is a satisfactory resolution to the dispute."

The union has played a duplicitous role from the beginning of the dispute. Painted by the media as the main

obstacle to the government's agenda, the union has worked to prevent teachers winning wider public support, presenting the conflict as a salaries claim. It has never linked the government's proposed award to the deterioration of public education as a whole. In less public utterances, the union has continually cited its record in implementing "flexible" work practices. Its main concern was that initially the government aimed to by-pass the union, unveiling its award on the Internet and attempting to negotiate directly with teachers.

By contrast, teachers have shown their determination to fight the government's agenda, consistently holding to the view that the central issue has been not wages but conditions. In the first 24-hour strike last November, 25,000 teachers, parents and students marched on state parliament, hurling thousands of copies of the award over the parliament fence. In an unprecedented protest during school holidays, over 1,000 teachers rallied outside the education department's head office in January. When school resumed, teachers voted overwhelmingly for further strike action. Instead the union began two-month-long "talks" with the education department, designed to dissipate teachers' militancy.

Nevertheless, signs of opposition began to emerge outside the framework of the official negotiations. In February, 90 percent of the state's secondary school teachers placed a ban on a language and literacy test, protesting against use of test results to reduce the numbers of specialist support teachers. The peak parents' organisation and both primary and secondary principals' associations criticised the government's policies.

Throughout the dispute it was noticeable that concerted efforts by both Sydney daily newspapers, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Daily Telegraph*, to rally parents against teachers and to turn teachers themselves against the dispute, fell flat. The media were unable to generate any significant public animosity toward teachers.

Last month, wrongly gauging that teachers' anger had largely subsided, union leaders were on the verge of recommending a similar sell-out deal to stopwork meetings. But they effected an about-face at the last minute, confounding press and government predictions that the dispute was at an end. At the meetings the next day, teachers voted 20,000 to 800 for a possible 24-hour strike on May 4, with teachers at a number of meetings calling for 48-hour or indefinite strike action.

On the day set for the 24-hour stoppage, there was a concerted bid to confuse, demoralise and divide teachers. Radio news bulletins at 4pm on the eve of the proposed

strike reported that it had been called off. The union organised no rallies or meetings. In advice leaked to the press and prominently reported, a union organiser urged teachers to "sleep in, play golf or tennis and have a great day". This message left no doubt that the union did not want teachers to mobilise on the day. Nevertheless, 70 percent of teachers backed the strike.

Predictably, throughout the dispute, while teachers have been fighting to oppose the government's attacks on public education, the media has continued to turn reality on its head and indict teachers for "damaging" public schools by taking strike action and imposing bans.

The campaign by the government, the media and the union to impose "flexible" working conditions on government school teachers is part of a wider agenda by both federal and state governments to cut costs and shift funding from public to private schools.

The federal government's Enrolment Benchmark Adjustment formula, which siphons money out of the public school system when enrolments increase at a slower rate than those of private schools, has resulted in a cut of \$17 million in federal government funding this year because there was a decline of 29 students in the public school system in 1999. State government spending on public education has fallen for four years in a row, from 26 percent of the state budget in 1997 to 22 percent this year.

In the face of such funding cutbacks, individual school administrations and "non-performing" teachers are then blamed for "failing" schools. The culture of making schools compete against each other and private providers for "market share" now underpins the entire education system. The new teachers' award has been framed with a view to accelerating this environment.

Teachers must be warned. If they accept the union's sellout agreement, it will set in motion galloping privatisation and the further undermining of jobs, working conditions and basic rights. To defend not only their own interests but those of students, parents and public education as a whole, they must reject this betrayal and demand the expanded funding needed to create a first class education system for all.



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