

# Lack of alternative leads New South Wales teachers to accept union deal

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New South Wales public school and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers voted earlier this month to accept an award agreement between the union and the state Labor government, ending almost eight months of bitter industrial disputation.

Around 22,000 teachers attended stopwork meetings held in venues across the state, with 84 percent voting in favour of the award, 15 percent against and 1 percent abstaining. This hardly represents an overwhelming endorsement of the NSW Teachers Federation deal by the state's 60,000 teachers. It is significant that around 3,000 teachers voted against the settlement, despite strong support for it by the union leaders.

The fact that the deal was accepted by most teachers who voted, however, raises important political issues.

On the one hand, when the Carr government first unilaterally unveiled its new award last November, it provoked a level of anger from teachers not seen for more than a decade. It was evident time and again, both in and out of the classroom, that teachers were determined to fight the destruction of their conditions. In May, almost seven months after the publication of the award and confounding the calculations of both the government and the union, teachers continued to overwhelmingly back calls for further strike action. Even in the week leading up to the vote, when supposedly the deal had been stitched up, union leaders remained tight-lipped, obviously nervous about which way the vote would go.

Yet the agreement that teachers voted to accept delivers most of the government's key demands for deregulated working conditions, the main issues over which teachers fought.

The new award, now in force, breaks up the concept of the fixed school day of 9 am to 3.30 pm. While the original award posted last November demanded that teachers work anywhere between 7 am and 10 pm Monday to Saturday, teachers of Years 11 and 12 can now

be "programmed" to teach anywhere between 7.30 am and 5.30 pm, Monday to Friday. On top of this, they, along with all other teachers, can "by agreement" be required to work after 5.30 pm at TAFE colleges.

The government's original demand for teacher "mobility" remains intact. Teachers will no longer be fixed at one institution. School and TAFE teachers are now interchangeable. Employees of schools and TAFE colleges who are considered supernumerary at one work site can be directed to work at any other.

The introduction of a category of "temporary" teacher in schools remains in place. Similar provisions in TAFE colleges have resulted in half the permanent staff being replaced by far less expensive casuals. Additionally, while the government has removed its award demand that principals be put on contracts, it is proceeding to achieve that end by other means, having already placed its first advertisement for a principal to be employed on a 3-5 year performance contract.

The long-established practice of a teacher's salary automatically going up for each year of service is eliminated, as the government originally demanded. This, in effect, takes the first step to "performance" pay for teachers. Also retained are "streamlined" measures to remove "under performing" teachers.

In addition, teachers are now bound to carry out the battery of student tests that the government originally insisted upon. These tests will supposedly "lift standards" but in fact will be used to justify staffing cuts or to highlight so-called non-performing schools.

The government gave ground on pay rates for casual teachers. Instead of having to accept a pay cut, casual teachers' pay will be in line with that paid in private schools. As well, the government's original pay offer to full time teachers went up from 9.6 percent over four years to increases of between 3 and 5 per cent per year over the next three years. This does not even keep up with

inflation, however, let alone reverse the erosion of teachers' living standards.

Obviously pleased with the award's outcome, the Carr government was reportedly preparing to reward education head, Ken Boston, with a substantial cash bonus. Yet the union hailed the agreement as a victory, claiming it protected working conditions. The deal “would deliver stability to public schools and TAFE colleges for the next three and a half years,” the union said, promising industrial peace. The Democratic Socialist Party also applauded the outcome in its paper, *Green Left Weekly*, in an article headed “NSW Teachers Win.”

In reality, the deal goes a long way towards satisfying the government's original intention to “free” teachers' working conditions from restrictions, made clear in its document, “Why Schools and Tafe need this award,” posted on the internet last November along with the original award. The essence of the document's argument was that public schools and technical colleges had to compete with each other and with private providers for shrinking education funds. To enable schools to survive in the education marketplace, teachers' working conditions had to become “flexible”.

Together with the federal Howard government, the Carr government is increasingly withdrawing from the funding of public education, pushing growing numbers of students into the private system, which is heavily subsidised by the federal government. This has left public schools with a declining funding base, apportioned according to enrolment levels. Once a school begins to lose students, funding and staffing are immediately cut, placing pressure on remaining staff to attract higher numbers. This has already led to worsened conditions for teachers—longer hours, larger class sizes and teachers working outside their area of expertise—while doing nothing to stem the drift from public to private schools.

The new award is a major step in implementing the official deregulation and privatisation agenda for public education. The obvious question is: how was the government able to stitch it up?

From last November, the union protested at being sidelined by the government and worked to get teachers to accept the government's main demands. It used long-established tactics to dissipate teachers' anger, to wear them down, and to keep them confused and isolated.

Far from challenging the government's underlying agenda, the union leaders helped cover it up. At no point in the campaign did they expose or oppose the government's aims. Meanwhile, the corporate media

portrayed teachers as pursuing purely personal interests, against those of parents and students.

The dispute was presented as a limited one over salaries. Teachers were demonised for “damaging” the education of students and “destroying” public education by imposing bans and holding stoppages. Notably, these attempts to turn public feeling against teachers failed, but the broader issues were obscured.

Other tactics were used to exhaust teachers. To string out the campaign and stymie the developing momentum, the union entered into closed-door talks for eight weeks. Finally, another two months and a further 24-hour strike later, teachers met on June 2 to vote on the package put together by the union and government.

At the final meeting, speaking via satellite to statewide meetings of teachers, union president Sue Simpson falsely claimed that the deal contained nothing new and that there were no inroads into teachers' conditions. Union officials, seconding the official recommendation, claimed the Carr government was in an “unassailable” position and teachers were “isolated.” In fact, the government, facing wider discontent, including from other public sector workers, was desperate to secure a deal.

In the end, the vote was, in many respects, similar to the outcome of present-day general elections. It was a vote by default, indicating not so much support for a party's (or union's) policies but the lack of a clear and progressive alternative.

While the deal has gone through, the implications of the government's measures will lead in the coming months to growing upheavals in schools as the far-reaching attacks in the award begin to bite. To this point, teachers have been unable to advance a coherent alternative to the government's program—that is, a concept of social priorities where education, health and other essential social programs, take absolute precedence over the requirements of private profit. Such an alternative to the government's corporate agenda is crucial for organising a political struggle to ensure that high-quality public schools, equipped with the very latest technology, are available to all students, regardless of their social status, income level or race.



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