

Australia: NSW teachers endorse 48-hour strike in February

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Public school and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers across the state of New South Wales held stopwork meetings over their salaries claim last week, voting to endorse a union recommendation for a 48-hour strike on February 11 and 12, early in the new school year.

Teachers also agreed to impose a range of bans, including on the writing of an annual report on each school's results and on administering tests, such as the basic skills tests and ELLA and SNAP (literacy and maths) tests from the start of 2004.

While the number of teachers who turned out to vote on the strike resolution—16,000 out of the state's 50,000—appeared to be down on the last two-hour stoppage on July 29, some 98 percent of those who attended last week's meetings backed the strike, reflecting the mood among teachers.

NSW teachers have not undertaken a two-day strike since 1981. While the immediate trigger for the strike is to support their claim for a 25 percent pay increase over two years, as part of a new industrial award due to commence on January 1, the vote, and the fact that the union felt obliged to recommend it, expresses broader underlying discontent.

Teachers are disgusted not only with the continuing erosion of their salaries, estimated to have fallen by more than 20 percent in real terms over the past five years alone, but the erosion of education budgets and the systematic dismantling of the public education system by successive Liberal and Labor governments, state and federal. At the same time, there is a growing distrust, born out of bitter experiences, in the teachers' union leadership.

Three years ago, the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) assisted the state Labor government to push through its central demand that teachers had to accept

more "flexible" working conditions in the name of making public education more competitive in the "education market place".

The 2000 award extended the working day, allowing some teachers to be required to work anytime from 7.30 a.m. to 5 p.m., permitted teachers to be directed to work in a number of different schools and introduced the category of "temporary" teachers. The government's agenda sparked intense opposition, resulting in the largest teachers' rally for more than a decade. But eventually, after the better part of a year, the union managed to wear down the resistance of teachers, in return for small pay increases.

The union was further discredited in March 2001 when it did little to oppose the government's plan to shut down 10 Sydney schools. Parents and teachers were largely left on their own to conduct a campaign against the closure of each school.

The NSWTF launched its latest campaign in July, acutely aware of the undercurrent of hostility among teachers over its previous actions. At the July stopwork meeting, union officials insisted that this time there would be no trading off of conditions, and called a 24-hour strike on September 17. The Victorian and Western Australian (WA) teachers' unions, also facing unrest, later recommended a strike on the same day. The national teachers' union, the Australian Education Union, hailed it as an "historic national day of action".

But union leaders had no intention of developing a concerted and united campaign, despite the fact that teachers in every state face Labor governments carrying out a far-reaching assault on public education. The much-vaunted "cross-border" unity has been deliberately allowed to dissipate.

The Western Australian teachers union has since ordered its members to call off industrial action,

including strikes and bans on compiling student reports. The union has apparently reached a deal with the WA Labor government, after the government placed a \$20,000 advertisement in last weekend's papers, outlining its pay and conditions offer to teachers. Teachers in Victoria are likely to take further industrial action at the start of the new year, with no headway being made in their pay dispute.

In NSW, union leaders always intended to tie their members to a "work value" ruling by the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC), sending the claim into the court even before the one-day strike. They have attempted to foster the illusion that the case offers a "once in a decade" opportunity for a substantial wage increase, citing as precedents a 20 percent increase in teachers' salaries in 1970 and a "large increase" in 1981, attained through work value cases.

It is significant that NSWTF officials are compelled to reach back two or three decades to point to something that they can claim as a clear victory. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the union assisted state governments, both Labor and Liberal, in making deep inroads into public education. Behind the slashing of social services was a growing competition between the states to attract investors by cutting corporate taxes and offering financial incentives at the expense of the needs of working people.

The very basis of the union's case in the IRC is the worsening conditions that it has helped impose on teachers and students. The September issue of the NSWTF journal, *Education*, lists a range of factors that have increased teachers' workloads, in support of the case for a salary increase. They include the "difficult conditions under which teachers work, student discipline and violence, community and parental expectations of schools, and the competitive environment in which schools and TAFE operate".

The NSW government is deepening its offensive. Education Minister Andrew Refshauge has confirmed plans to shed 1,000 jobs and slash \$70 million a year from the education budget in its latest restructure. He has made it plain that any pay rise for teachers over 3 percent per year must be financed from reductions to school budgets, raising the threat of further cutbacks to education services, bigger class sizes and more teacher job losses.

While the union has publicly ruled out trading off

more conditions for a pay rise, there is little doubt that it will make concessions in the course of the IRC case. The government has already indicated its line of attack. It has dismissed the union's work value case with contempt, arguing, for example, that because student assessment procedures have been standardised, the amount of work that teachers do has, in fact, decreased.

The WSWs spoke to two NSW teachers who are sceptical about the union's role in the dispute. They identified increased workload, on-the-job stress and lack of funding as the major issues. Helena, an English teacher in her first year of teaching, said: "I haven't been working long enough to know what changes have taken place, but I don't have much hope that the strike will do much. It seems to be a fruitless statement. I'm supporting the strike because I think we need to give people a wake up call. A lot of people don't know what's involved in teaching.

"There needs to be a restructuring of the whole budget so that more priority is placed on education. The government says it doesn't have any money but things are just going to deteriorate and no one will want to teach in the public education system."

Maureen, an English teacher with two years teaching experience, said she had thought the strike was not only about salaries but also about funding for schools. "It's always in the back of my head that we need more funding for resources. In terms of the government's priorities, I think things are just going to get worse. I don't think the strike will give us a 25 percent increase. More likely a 5 percent increase. To make an impact I'd go out for a week or two. I don't know if there's a way to let the public know what things are really like."

While teachers have voted for a two-day strike, the union leadership has left open the option of calling off the stoppage if it obtains an interim decision from the IRC before then. It has provided for an emergency meeting of the union executive in late January, before the start of the new school year.



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