

Australia: NSW teachers strike but union prepares to deliver staffing changes

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Public school teachers in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) will strike on May 22 to fight the state Labor government's latest move to abolish the state-wide system of staffing schools. The NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF), however, is working to accommodate the government's demands.

At a union council meeting on May 12, officials made clear their willingness to open the door further to the local hiring of teachers by school principals. The resolution passed by the meeting offered to help "achieve a different mix of staffing procedures than previously applied". It also suggested that increased appointments of casual teachers to fill permanent jobs created "a vacancy-driven opportunity to achieve a different mix of staff appointments".

From the outset, Premier Morris Iemma's government has sought to ride roughshod over teachers' opposition. On February 4, Education Minister John Della Bosca unilaterally announced to the media that from April 28, the first day of Term 2, principals would be free to fill vacancies through local recruitment. Months earlier, he had broken off negotiations with the union about the 2008-11 staffing agreement.

Della Bosca's move is one element of a broader agenda to undermine teachers' conditions, move toward performance pay and impose on schools themselves, rather than the government, accountability for performance results regardless of chronic underfunding.

Successive governments have long sought to dismantle the established method in which schools, whether located in socio-economically disadvantaged areas, isolated rural districts or better-off metropolitan suburbs, are allocated teachers on a common basis by a centralised staffing unit.

Teachers have opposed "local selection" because it opens the way for favouritism and victimisation, and will widen the gap between wealthy and poor schools. Principals themselves are under considerable pressure to "perform"—that is, attract students and run "cost-effective" schools.

Underpinning the centralised system was the conception that governments had responsibility for ensuring that resources, including trained and qualified teachers, were distributed equitably. Staffing agreements gave priority to both permanent and casual teachers who had taught for years in hard-to-staff schools. Genuine educational equity was always a myth, but systemic inequalities have been increasingly exacerbated by funding shortages. Schools in affluent areas can rely on donations by parents and benefactors, helping to make them more attractive workplaces, while working class schools are being marginalised.

The NSWTF has sought to dissipate teachers' anger and wear down their resistance, leaving them to deal as individuals with the government's new system.

The union's first response to Della Bosca's declaration was to schedule a two-hour stopwork some two months later, on April 8. While over 20,000 teachers attended meetings that day and voted overwhelmingly for the 24-hour strike on May 22, the main thrust of the union's campaign was to hold out the hope that the government would enter into "meaningful negotiations".

Meanwhile, the new system is already being introduced. By April 28, 624 teachers had sent in transfer applications, up from the 58 received by the Education Department in the corresponding period last year. Hundreds of teachers have apparently drawn their own conclusions that the union will organise no genuine opposition.

The NSWTF has published statistics showing that nearly a third of all teacher vacancies are already being filled through a form of local selection, a process the union has facilitated. Its purpose in releasing the figures was not to expose the dismantling of state-wide staffing, but to convince the government that it could be more effectively implemented through the union.

According to the statistics, 30 percent of the 7,000 or so vacancies during 2006-07 were filled through interviews, that is, through a form of principal hire. While the majority were principal and executive vacancies, around 1 in 7 classroom teacher vacancies were filled locally. Of these, 184 were under an agreement struck by the NSWTF and the government in 2005 introducing partial local selection. That deal gave principals the option of accepting the teacher at the top of the department's employment list or interviewing the top five teachers.

With billions of dollars being poured into private schools by the federal and state governments, top scoring teacher graduates have been lured by better pay and conditions to private schools. Instead of seeking to raise the standard of public education across the board, the NSW government has introduced a "targetted graduate scheme," giving up to 1,000 teachers annually priority over those on the employment list.

Another way around the employment list has been the priority given to hundreds of casual teachers every year under the Permanent Employment Program (PEP). The PEP, also established in negotiations between the NSWTF and the government, allows local allocation of permanent positions to casual teachers. The chief purpose is to hold casuals as a whip over the heads of other teachers: in the hope of securing permanent appointment, casuals are coerced into undertaking the most onerous duties.

In 2006-07, 322 casual teachers were appointed under this program. In its May 12 council resolution, the union said an additional 500 permanent positions would need to be filled in 2008-09 due to an expected increase in retirement rates. "Accordingly, the Federation has proposed in negotiations that the number of positions under the Permanent Employment Program (PEP) could be increased to meet school needs and achieve a mix of staffing appointments."

What is at stake is the equitable provision of teachers to schools across the state, the defence of permanent

jobs and of teachers' job security. Having starved public schools of funds year after year, the government cynically claims that the staffing reforms will benefit disadvantaged public schools that are being staffed by a high proportion of new and inexperienced teachers.

In the name of making schools compete in the "education marketplace," public education is being turned into a "user pays" service. Because the union has no real opposition to the "free market" agenda of the Iemma government, it has bent over backwards to assist. The government has been given time to put its new staffing model into place, locking hundreds of teachers into the new arrangements.

To turn this situation around, teachers should take matters out of the hands of the NSWTF and elect rank and file committees that will undertake a genuine defence of centralised staffing as part of the wider struggle for high-quality public education as a basic right for all. Support can and must be won from teachers around Australia, as well as from parents, students and all working people. As this dispute highlights, such a campaign must be based on an entirely opposed perspective to that of the unions and the Labor government: one that aims at the complete reorganisation of society on socialist foundations so that the needs of the majority take precedence over the profits of the wealthy few.



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