

# Australia: NSW teachers strike against attacks on jobs and conditions

**Our reporters**  
**28 May 2008**

More than 34,000 teachers from New South Wales (NSW) public schools and Technical and Further Education colleges stopped work for 24 hours on May 22 in protest against the state Labor government's attacks on jobs and working conditions.

Since April 28, the Iemma government has introduced a new model of local recruitment which gives school principals the power to hand-pick teachers. This replaces a long-standing system in which the Education Department supplied teachers centrally to the state's 2,200 schools. The new "principal hire" opens the way for victimisation and favouritism. It will exacerbate the divide between rich and poor public schools, and pressure principals to employ under-qualified teachers.

TAFE teachers joined the walkout to express their opposition to government moves to downgrade TAFE teaching qualifications from a 700-hour degree or graduate diploma at a university to a 90-hour course available through private and community colleges.

A rally organised by the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) was attended by around 3,000 teachers. It was held outside the state Education Department offices in central Sydney, and protesters brought flags and banners from schools across the state expressing their anger at Education Minister John Della Bosca and the department's Director General, Michael Coutts-Trotter.

While teachers' hostility to the government's plans was clearly evident, the event was tightly stage-managed by the NSWTF leadership.

Officials explained how the new recruitment methods would widen the gulf between impoverished and better-off schools and denounced the state Labor government for abandoning teachers and students. They also issued vague threats of further industrial action while telegraphing to the state government that the union could efficiently deliver staffing changes without dismantling the state-wide employment system, as it had done before.

NSWTF president Maree O'Halloran told teachers the union had been negotiating staffing agreements with Liberal and Labor governments for 15 years. But now, she declared, "we have a director-general with no idea about how to staff our schools other than some sort of managerial theory that we think about but we don't have any idea how it will work in practice, and a minister who tells us to suck it and see."

NSWTF senior vice-president Gary Zadkovich said the union had repeatedly advised the government that an expected increase in teacher retirement rates could be used as a "vacancy-driven opportunity to achieve a different mix of staff appointments" and that under the 2005-8 staffing agreement, more than 2,500 teachers had been recruited through a form of principal hire.

"We have put these ideas on the table," he said, "but they have cast them aside and conduct their policies by edict. The director general has said he will exercise his managerial prerogative but he doesn't have a clue about what goes on in our class rooms in this state."

Zadkovich was cheered when he declared: "If these people think that this is the only action we are going to take they're terribly wrong. We will

conduct political and industrial action on this issue next week, next month, next year if necessary. We will not abandon public school students to the policies that these people are seeking to impose."

TAFE teachers' association president Rob Long denounced the government for its "lack of consultation" and said the government was motivated by "short-term budget gain" while NSWTF executive member Laurie Mulholland, a Keira High School principal, was loudly cheered after he told the rally that many secondary principals opposed the government changes to staff and were on strike throughout NSW.

The real agenda, he continued, "is to withdraw funding and resources from public schools" with these measures "dressed up in terms like self management of schools, community control and other Orwellian phrases". The new proposals would "introduce an alien and destructive culture" and not deliver "any improvement in student outcomes, extra teachers or dollars to overcome the chronic under-funding of public schools." Mulholland called on teachers to support the union campaign "for as long as it takes".

NSWTF deputy president Bob Lipscombe concluded the rally by reading out messages of support from Australian Education Union federal president Angelo Gavrielatos and Unions NSW secretary John Robertson. He called on teachers to lobby their local members of parliament and the media. "Be prepared for further action," he said, "if this government doesn't see sense and commit itself to genuine negotiations". The meeting chairman closed the meeting accompanied by chants of "We will be back".

Notwithstanding the militant rhetoric, the demagogic denunciations of Della Bosca or Coutts-Trotter, and the references to more protests, last week's walkout was designed to use teachers' anger as leverage in the union's negotiations with the government.

Union officials put no proposal or resolution for future industrial action to the rally and blocked calls by Socialist Equality Party member and teacher, Erika Zimmer, to address the meeting. Zimmer was told by union officials that they were running the rally and that no speeches from rank and file teachers would be allowed.

The NSWTF has a long record of organising stage-managed protests while concluding deals with the government that ride roughshod over members' jobs and working conditions. In 2000, it accommodated to government demands that public schools compete in the "education marketplace". In 2004, the NSWTF refused to mobilise teachers against demands by the Carr Labor government that the employment of principals be made conditional on their meeting performance targets, and in 2005, it signed off on a deal to introduce partial local selection of teachers.

In reality, the NSWTF has no fundamental opposition to the Iemma government's demands that public education be made subordinate to the profit requirements of big business. Prior to the 24-hour strike, for example, the union published statistics revealing that 30 percent of the approximately 7,000 teacher vacancies in 2006-7 had already been filled by local selection.

That is why the defence of public school jobs, conditions and the educational rights of every student requires, above all, the development of a political struggle not only against the NSWTF and the rest of the union bureaucracy, but against the state and federal Labor governments. As a first step, moves should be made to link up with the fight currently being waged by Victorian teachers against a sell-out deal struck between their union and the state Brumby Labor government, and with teachers around the country. Such a campaign can only be carried forward on the basis of a socialist perspective aimed at fundamentally changing the priorities of economic and social life, including the complete reorganisation of public education to meet the needs of students, teachers and all working people, not the demands of corporate Australia.

Among the teachers at the rally who spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters was **Selahattin Fil**, a language teacher from Lidcombe primary school. He said: “The state government’s main aim is to privatise public education, just like what it’s trying to do with hospitals, roads, water and electricity.

“There are no differences between Labor and the Liberals. I would even say that Labor is worse because they say one thing and then do the opposite. They say that they support public education, yet every day spend millions of dollars on the army and warfare but hardly anything on education.

“I don’t think the trade unions are playing a good role either. A one-day strike doesn’t do much—obviously it doesn’t hurt—but there should be a general strike of teachers all around Australia, otherwise these governments don’t give a damn. This is what we need to work towards. And it seems to me that the unions should oppose Labor and the Liberal parties. These are system parties, which go up and down like seesaws—one comes and one goes—but all end up doing the same thing.”

**Nawal** has been an AMES (Adult Multicultural Education Services) teacher since 2004. Originally from Lebanon, she told the WSWs she came to rally in order “to defend our jobs, the future of the children we teach and for better education services. We need secure employment and more teachers.

“We immigrated to Australia for a better life and a future for ourselves and our kids,” she continued, “and yet now it seems to be getting worse here and especially in education. Education is the most important sector of any country and shouldn’t be run like a business.”

Nawal called for “national action” to defend teachers’ jobs and conditions: “I’ve just picked up a leaflet about 1968 in France,” she continued, “when many workers came out on strike and it was something like a revolution. We need this to get what we want and for the good of this country.”

**Tim Jones** from AMES Sydney has been teaching for 23 years. “In the 1980s AMES staff, supported by management, went down to Canberra to lobby the government to get an English-language service for migrants, and we were successful. Now the present education department management is happily dismantling teachers’ gains. They’re not replacing permanent teachers who retire and only employing casuals and full-time temporary,” he said.

“These are retrograde steps and based on short-term economic priorities that fail to think about the future. As a teacher I’m concerned about trying to overcome inequity, not having the government increasing it by directing money to private schools. In many ways we’re going backwards.”

**Greg** told the WSWs: “I’m a TAFE teacher and very concerned that the present government’s policy is to reduce teachers’ qualifications. This is happening in England where they bring in teaching assistants because they can’t get adequate teaching staff. The assistants end up taking classes and in the UK assistants don’t need to have any teaching qualifications and they cost a lot less money.

“The [NSW education] department is trying to bring this into TAFE in

the name of achieving ‘parity’ with part-time teachers, who don’t need the level of qualifications as full-time teachers. I understand the need for parity but I think it should be raising the standards of teachers, not lowering them. We should be trying for the best we can get, not the worst.”

Greg said TAFE teachers also opposed the new staffing arrangements. “The government is trying to divide and conquer teachers. These issues—schools not being able to get enough teachers and employing teachers without proper qualifications—are very closely linked. If the department’s staffing scheme goes ahead it will be very difficult to find teachers to work in low socio-economic areas and so they will then say, ‘We can’t find people to work with qualifications, so let’s hire people without qualifications’.”

**Lindsay**, who has been teaching for 34 years, said: “I’m on strike because I’ve been in western Sydney schools and know just how difficult it is, and it’s harder than it used to be. Under the current scheme these schools are guaranteed to get teachers and it is more or less equitable. Under the intended scheme it’s a free-for-all with schools there and in the remote areas of the state being really hard-pressed to find people. It will be a situation like we have with doctors and with dentists. Even up in the Blue Mountains region where I live, which is only 100 kilometres from Sydney, we have trouble attracting some professions.

“Labor’s supposed to be pro-public education but I think the reason they’re doing it has to do with the private school lobby and the weight they have these days. Apart from that I’m a bit puzzled but there is a parallel with the government’s privatisation agenda for the state’s electricity supplies, which I don’t agree with either. Public utilities as important as that should remain in government’s hands and not be handed over to businesses, which are all about profits before people.”

**Linda Noordewier** from Kensington primary school has taught for 25 years: “Giving principals the right to hire and therefore fire teachers is the thin edge of the wedge. I’ve looked at what is happening in Victoria and don’t want this sort of thing coming up here.

“I’m surprised this is coming from a Labor government and I’m so outraged about it that I’m going to vote Liberal next time. I’ve voted Labor all my life but want to sweep out the dirt. I know that there’s probably no real difference between the two but I’m so angry. How dare they do this to us!”

**Don Whibley**, a primary teacher of 34 years but currently on leave, told the WSWs: “This is more than just a staffing issue but is about the destruction of public education as we know it. Labor is moving towards privatisation and handing powers to principals that can be abused. What we’re dealing with is like something from a Liberal government and will bring about a total change in the work place.

“Although you mightn’t get as much money as others when you take on a teaching career, I made the decision because of certain working conditions. Now the government is getting rid of these conditions—it’s like playing football and then somehow in the middle of the game the goal posts are changed.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**