

# New South Wales teachers speak out: “We’re starving the public schools”

Our reporter

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On October 25, delegates to a New South Wales Teachers Federation council meeting in Sydney spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters about the latest offer by the NSW government (See accompanying article). Delegates from across the state, including rural and regional areas, said the proposed changes represented a major attack on teachers' conditions and on the public education system.

Michael Trotter from **Port Macquarie** said: "Most of the teachers at my school have said we'd be better off to say 'no increase and let's keep our conditions'. They certainly don't see it as a viable offer from the government in any shape or form. The sick leave proposals are totally unacceptable. As we all know, teachers work in very stressful conditions. Being locked up in winter with 30 children, the potential for cross infections is high. The cuts are preposterous. We're not bureaucrats that sit in air-conditioned offices all day. We're out there in the frontline dealing with individuals that come to school with colds and flu..."

"The government's attacks on workers compensation show that it is targeting the most vulnerable. It's a real worry. It shows the real culture in the Department in terms of staff welfare and a blatant lack of consideration for those that are undergoing some sort of rehabilitation or have some sort of psychological illness or physical damage due to work-related activities.

"Teachers give and give and give, and a lot of teachers are saying that they can't give any more; there's nothing left. As teachers, we've paid for the Sydney Olympics, we've paid for droughts, we've paid for floods. I don't see why the public sector should bear the cost of financial disasters and other financial decisions that government chooses to make. It's financial ineptitude on their part that the budget is in the state it is.

"The government's abolition of state-wide [staffing] will rear its head in my school very shortly and we're prepared to face it as well.

"We have motions at our federation meeting at a school level that all vacancies at my school be filled in the first instance by transfer. We will be certainly fighting at a school

level and my school has been in support of other schools in a similar situation. There will definitely be industrial action if the principal goes against staff wishes."

Michael Cotter from **Bowral** Public School said: "We had a meeting at our school yesterday and we passed two resolutions. In the first, we repudiated any trade-offs of any existing conditions for any kind of what we see as a fake rise. We also endorsed as a separate motion a no-confidence motion in the Director-General that was unanimous.



**Michael Cotter**

"The trade-off of sick pay is appalling. It's dreadful. We're in

an industry where part of our occupational hazard is to be infected by toxic kids (laughs) and it's not acceptable either when we're expected to come up with multiple visits to the doctor to get medical certificates just to certify something that's genuine. There's this great suspicion that we might be putting one over the public. Teachers aren't that sort of people."

Anne Powell of Tormeena Public School near **Coffs Harbour** said: "I absolutely hate the idea of performance pay because how can you judge a teacher's performance by what happens in the classroom? And children are not a commodity. They are all different. There's more to it than teaching the '3 Rs'—there's all the care and love.

"The sick pay won't go. No one will stand for that. We've fought too long to get things, like the fight that my grandfather had to just get a 48-hour week. My father didn't have holidays. The factory closed down at Christmas, you went home, and you didn't have pay for two weeks."

Natasha from **Collaroy Plateau** said: "The staff feels that they should take the 2.5 percent per annum without trade-offs, and the day that we trade off on our rights will be a very sad day. The cut in sick pay was the most important point. The second most important point was using your leave without pay. Using your long service before you're allowed to take leave without pay was the other thing the staff at my school were not happy about. I'm very disappointed about Kevin Rudd and Nathan Rees, you would expect more from a Labor government."

Margaret Brace from Kyogle High School near **Lismore** said: "The trade-offs are unacceptable. If we trade this off now, the young teachers coming later, when they hit a rough patch, will get slugged and I don't think we can afford to do that. There are a lot of other things in the pay deal, like workers compensation changes, that are unacceptable.

"The issue with five days' sick leave and then having to get a doctors certificate... for people in rural areas going to a doctor is sometimes very difficult. You have to book weeks ahead, so that would not work.

"The transfer system is a dreadful thing. It's going to destroy public education. I have a daughter out in Griffith, a temporary teacher, and she said that teachers are packing and leaving in droves. It's all a worry for the future.

"I'm very worried about the Rudd government. It makes me feel churned in the stomach. I don't think it's a Labor government. The funding to the private schools has just gone through until 2012. Public education will be gone by then. Principals are just managers. I can see it. I've been teaching for 35 years."

Kerry Johnson, a senior officer working on equity programs, said: "My focus is the plight of schools that are characterised by large numbers of families from low socio-

economic backgrounds. This is something that causes me great concern because these initiatives being suggested are going to further marginalise those schools and those communities. Things like performance pay particularly... I mean, how can you tell which teacher it was that caused the improvement? It's impossible, and much research has come out and pointed out that it's impossible. The notion of paying people on students' results when we know that there is a significant achievement gap for schools that are disadvantaged [is ridiculous]. Many schools are working very hard and improving their results, but research constantly shows that there is a gap, and the notion that the teachers in those schools would not be targeted for performance pay is just another inequity.

"Even things like the roll-out of computers to schools and so on, and the nonsense of not addressing the infrastructure that schools require to actually support them. We know that schools in more advantaged communities are able to provide this because they have access to more funding. The parents are able to pay voluntary contributions, they can actually employ private networkers to set up their systems, and once again it's the more disadvantaged communities that will be continually marginalised and those are the very students who won't have access to the technologies that some consider to be the norm."

John Cox from **Ulladulla** on the state's south coast said: "Rudd's 'Education Revolution'? It won't do us any good. A friend of mine teaches in New York and this is exactly what they've been doing over there. In New York, if a teacher gets an average of 85 percent in an ancient history class and the same average the following year they're classed as a failure because they haven't improved from the previous year. It's an absolute farce. There has to be a turn-around. What we're doing here is exactly what John Howard did. We're institutionalising the private schools. We're subsidising the rich and we're starving the public schools."



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