

Australia: NSW Labor's pay offer to teachers foreshadows savage spending cuts

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A salaries "offer" made by New South Wales Labor Premier Nathan Rees to the state's public school teachers foreshadows savage cuts to government spending. These will be made public when the NSW government hands down an emergency mini-budget on November 11 to deal with the impact of the global financial crisis.

Rees, who has repeatedly proclaimed that his first priority is the maintenance of the state's AAA credit rating, has warned his government will not "shy away from making the hard decisions", flagging major cuts to the public service across every sector. His offer to teachers, slashing long-held working conditions in exchange for what is effectively a pay cut, is a forewarning of austerity measures aimed at making ordinary working people pay for the state's \$1 billion revenue black hole.

The offer, placed on the state education department's website on October 17, provides for an 11 percent rise over three years: 4.8 percent to be paid from January 2009, 3.5 percent in 2010 and 2.7 percent in January 2011. With the official inflation rate currently at 5 percent per annum, these paltry amounts fail to address rising living costs.

In exchange, teachers will have to agree to a range of savage trade-offs to their existing working conditions:

- Teachers' annual sick leave entitlement will be cut by two-thirds. Sick leave will be cut from 22 days at full pay and 22 days at half pay to just 10 days' sick leave per year.
- The number of extra lessons that teachers are required to cover, for sick or absent colleagues, will increase from six per term to 10.
- Further streamlining of dismissal procedures. Teachers considered to be "underperforming" will have to show "improvement" in a fixed period of 10 weeks or face dismissal, regardless of illness or other circumstances.

- Reduced workers compensation entitlements. Under current arrangements, teachers injured at work receive 26 weeks' full pay after which pay rates plummet to \$376.70 per week. The ability to top up base rates by drawing on sick leave or long service leave entitlements will be abolished.

- A range of cuts to entitlements and pay, including the axing of travel allowance for casuals and lower casual pay rates for permanent teachers who work while on leave without pay. Teachers will have to exhaust all long service leave before taking leave without pay.

- Annual performance review benchmarks will be lifted in line with a host of "standards" set out by the government's Institute of Teachers.

- A new executive annual performance review will be established for deputy principals, assistant principals and head teachers. While no detail is provided, this move will undoubtedly require executive teachers to meet similar performance benchmarks to those imposed on principals in 2004.

Under the terms of the government's offer, teachers must forego any further pay or entitlement claims for three years. But the same does not hold for the government, which has reserved for itself the right to "implement structural changes to reward high quality teaching". This confirms that state Labor has embraced "performance pay", a central plank of the federal Rudd Labor government's pro-market "education revolution".

From 2009 the Rudd government will make federal funding to schools conditional on the introduction of "individual school performance reporting". Performance pay is the essential corollary to this agenda, with teacher remuneration tied to a series of punitive "benchmarks", including student test results.

A large number of the changes being demanded by the Rees government are straight-out cost-cutting measures. The slashing of sick leave in particular is of major

concern to teachers for whom illness, especially during the cold winter months, is an occupational hazard.

With teachers forced to take on nearly twice as many lessons for sick or absent colleagues, the number of relief teachers employed will be slashed, with permanent staff stretched to breaking point. The measure will further erode time for lesson planning, marking and report-writing.

The streamlining of dismissal procedures is particularly ominous, as are the cuts to workers compensation, which will be used to drive sick and injured teachers out of the profession. So-called "underperforming" teachers will now have just 10 weeks to show "improvement" or face dismissal, providing for widespread victimisations and sackings.

The number of performance standards set out by the state government's NSW Institute of Teachers has been augmented. While they appear unobjectionable on the surface, there are so many of them compared with the present performance review, that the intent is clearly punitive. Once again, they can be used as a disciplining tool, with teachers scapegoated for a public school system beset by myriad problems as a result of decades of systematic attacks by both state and federal governments.

Meanwhile, a separate pay offer has been made to Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers: in return for a 12 percent pay increase over three years, the state government is demanding a 20-50 percent increase in work load on the grounds that TAFE colleges must compete with private providers.

The role of the NSWTF

Union leaders are aware that the publication of the terms of the pay deal, coming on top of the government's move to abolish the state-wide staffing system, will provoke widespread opposition (see accompanying interviews with teachers). The past year has seen industrial action by teachers across the state against the dismantling of centralised staffing selection, along with struggles by their counterparts in Victoria, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. The union's response has been, not to unify these struggles in a political offensive against the state and federal Labor governments, but to move them out of the political and industrial arena and into the courts.

Claiming that they were being motivated by "the climate of economic uncertainty and the high CPI figures", NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) union leaders, in a fax to their members, declared they had lodged a claim in the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) for a 5 per cent pay rise. The fax, which listed the details of the government's pay offer, contained no recommendation for any action.

In the union's council meeting held on October 25, NSWTF Deputy President Bob Lipscombe told delegates that the union's tactic was to "blindsides" the government, which was itself planning, in the event that the union rejected the pay deal, to rush into the IRC.

Conscious that such tactics would be viewed with deep suspicion and mistrust by many NSW teachers, Assistant General Secretary Brenda Seymour, addressing delegates at the weekend's meeting, provided a revealing insight into the union's tenuous hold over events.

In an extraordinary outburst Seymour maintained that if teachers questioned the union's actions and regarded them as a "softening" of its position, then they should understand that the move into the IRC was designed as a "veil" over what the union was really doing. Seymour demanded that teachers give the tactic time to work, after which she listed a series of "big actions, such as the four-day strike action in 1981", that the union was keeping up its sleeve.

In reality, the union is trying to throw a veil over the fact that the only campaign it is waging is one to wear down, isolate and demoralise its membership. This was again demonstrated by the "action" section of the union's recommendation on the staffing, standards and salaries campaign: a two-hour stop work meeting to be held on an unnamed day in November, in which teachers are to view a pre-recorded union DVD detailing "progress".

The struggle against the Labor government's pay offer can only go forward to the extent that it is taken out of the hands of the union, on the basis of a socialist program: one that directly challenges the dictates of the financial markets, the pro-market agenda contained in the Rudd government's "education revolution" and the profit system itself.



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