

Australian teachers union rams through regressive pay deal

Our reporters
18 February 2009

The New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) pushed through a staffing and salaries agreement with the state Labor government of Premier Nathan Rees at stop-work meetings on February 6. The anti-democratic character in which the deal was imposed underscores the regressive character of the measures it contains.

The new agreement halves sick leave, ushers in drastic cuts to workers' compensation and streamlines dismissal procedures. It overturns centralised staffing, with 50 percent of all new hires to be determined by school principals, further entrenching the shift to local school autonomy. It paves the way for measures long advocated by right-wing think tanks and which are now being introduced by the federal Labor government, including performance pay for teachers and school league tables.

With only minor adjustments, the agreement is the same as that voted down by teachers in November 2008. The pay rise of 12.48 percent over three years was barely one percent more than the previous offer. Teachers struck repeatedly last year, opposing the dismantling of state-wide staffing, demanding improved remuneration and calling for a halt to the systematic rundown of public education. Teachers in Victoria, South Australia and the Northern Territory also took action as the Australian Education Union moved to enforce a series of agreements in all states and territories, slashing conditions and facilitating new national curriculum and funding arrangements as part of Rudd's "education revolution".

In the wake of the meeting, NSWTF bureaucrats boasted of a 97 percent "yes" vote in favour of the agreement. But the outcome—like a similar "yes" vote registered in Victoria last year—did not constitute an overwhelming endorsement of the union's deal with the Rees government.

In the first place, it was the outcome of a deliberate campaign of disinformation by the union. On January 21, NSWTF officials hailed their deal with the Rees government as "a win", falsely portraying the new deal as a "back-down" by the government. On this basis they unilaterally cancelled the

48-hour strike by public school and TAFE teachers scheduled for the following week. They simultaneously announced a series of stop-work meetings whose basic purpose was to ram through their agreement.

The stop-work "broadcast meetings" organised by the NSWTF were a travesty of democracy. The membership was divided across dozens of separate locations. As usual, small venues were chosen, including RSL clubs and pubs. The meetings were organised to ensure the lowest possible attendance, commencing at 8.40 a.m., with a union directive that members must be back at work "by 10.30 a.m. at the latest".

The intended effect was clear: to present the union's deal as a fait accompli.

During the course of the "broadcast meetings" a genuine discussion and debate was suppressed. Teachers who raised questions, or who criticised the agreement, faced stonewalling and outright intimidation. A teacher who attended the meeting in Campsie told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "There was only 10 minutes for questions, with constant reminders [from officials] of 'limited time' and 'we have to be back at school by 10.30 a.m.'. After teachers expressed concern at the lack of time, an extra five minutes was given. Even then only four teachers were able to ask questions."

Teachers at most meetings were confronted with an Orwellian 40-minute pre-recorded SkyChannel broadcast. Officials, including NSWTF President Bob Lipscombe and Senior Vice-President Gary Zadkovich deliberately misrepresented the new agreement. The latter claiming it protected "permanent employment" and "defeated the latest attempt to abolish statewide staffing." In reality, teacher employment will increasingly be tied to individual schools, with all considerations of security of tenure, pay and conditions predicated upon a school's ability to rank well on national league tables.

Earlier this month, the Victorian state government unveiled a

scheme in which "strike teams," composed of ex-principals and leading teachers, will inspect schools for evidence of "improvement." Failure could lead to teachers and principals being asked to "move on." The NSW agreement paves the way for similar measures. As part of teachers' annual review, it stipulates they must provide evidence of having "added value" to their students' test performance.

While the union trumpeted "97 percent endorsement", possibly less than a quarter of the state's 60,000 school and TAFE teachers voted. One teacher reported that only 2 out of a staff of 60 attended. At Crestwood High in metropolitan Sydney around 10 percent attended. Despite repeated requests, NSWTF officials have refused to provide data indicating how many teachers voted.

The low turnout at the February stop-work meetings was not simply a product of bureaucratic suppression. It pointed to a widespread scepticism among teachers that the union would listen to them or campaign for anything better. It underscores the necessity to fight for a conscious socialist alternative among teachers to that advanced by the union bureaucracy.

During the meetings union officials repeatedly declared that because of the global economic crisis the wages and salaries deal could have been "a lot worse." In other words, teachers and public education as a whole had to accept the burden of the downturn. Staring down opposition from members, officials cynically warned that if teachers rejected the agreement they would be "back at square one".

At Baulkham Hills Sports Club, Socialist Equality Party member and teacher Erika Zimmer explained the need for a political alternative to the pro-market agenda of the unions and the Labor government. She condemned the anti-democratic methods of the union, explaining that they served a definite political purpose. "They are trying to stampede teachers to accept this deal, while remaining silent on its basic purpose, which is to enforce the Rudd government's 'education revolution'."

Zimmer told teachers: "The 2009 school year has opened under conditions of the biggest collapse of the global economy since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Rudd's claim that 30 years of neo-liberalism has ended are a fraud. His government is starting a new wave of market reforms in education.

"This year league tables—sold under the banner of 'transparency' and 'excellence'—will be published nationally. This has nothing to do with resolving the crisis in public education. It's about punishing schools. Those with the best resources will be winners. Schools with the least resources, and poorest test scores—will be the losers. Rudd's agenda—subjecting

education to the full blast of market forces—is completely inimical to society's needs."

In calling for a "no" vote and a nationwide ban on the Rudd government's new testing regime, Zimmer explained the need for a socialist solution to the crisis. "Governments around the world are handing over trillions of dollars of public money to the banks and financial institutions. Society needs to be fundamentally reorganised—these trillions should be used for education, health and social spending in the interests of the vast majority, not the profit requirements of a tiny handful."

The vote at Baulkham Hills Sports Club registered 130 in support of the union's deal, with 10 against. Prior to the meeting, WSWs reporters spoke with teachers who were clearly wary of the deal and raised concerns about the direction of public education.

One teacher described the Rudd government's stimulus package, which included infrastructure spending on private as well as public schools, as inequitable: "A lot more money should be spent on public schools, to bring them up to a standard that is acceptable, rather than funding private schools, which the parents have chosen to fund themselves. Everything is failing—the hospitals are failing, the schools are failing, and the roads are failing. If they had spent the money on these things 20 years ago, we wouldn't be in this situation."

The teacher, who wished to remain anonymous, said conditions for teachers were set to worsen: "I think it's inevitable that there will be more pressure on teachers. The pressure is coming from everywhere—society, parents. It's going to be a system that no one wants to join because it's going to be just too much. There's too much work to be done, that just can't be fitted into one day. The expectations are getting too high, not just for the teachers, but for the students."



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact