

Australia: Labor governments launch major assault on TAFE teachers

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Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers in the state of New South Wales (NSW) walked off the job last month to protest the biggest assault on their working conditions in decades, an agenda being driven by the federal Labor government's misnamed "education revolution" and being enforced by the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF). Further stoppages are scheduled next week.

The immediate trigger for the walkout was a ruling handed down on October 15 by the NSW Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) which directed that TAFE work-loads be increased by 20 percent in return for an average 1.5 percent annual salary "increase".

In settlement of the 2008-2011 TAFE award, the IRC ruled that the NSW Department of Education (DET) could direct teachers to:

- Attend work for an extra 5 hours per week
- Teach face-to-face an additional 36 hours per year
- Work any time between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. Monday to Friday
 - Average their teaching load over a year but also be compelled to teach additional "excess" hours even if they reach their annual allocated teaching load
 - Comply with managers' orders over the use of non-face-to-face instruction time, effectively removing the right of teachers to exercise professional judgement in determining the content of class preparation time

The state Labor government has been pressing for deep inroads into TAFE jobs and conditions. Education Minister Verity Firth has declared that teachers must deliver \$50 million annually in savings over the next three years. It is estimated Labor's funding cuts will mean the loss of 500 TAFE positions.

Teachers responded to the IRC's ruling by walking off the job in their hundreds—in what the media described as "wildcat strikes"—but the NSWTF leadership moved in quickly to suppress any industrial action by launching a legal case against the IRC decision in the NSW Court of Appeal.

Yet opposition continued to mount. On November 10, thousands of TAFE teachers across the state attended three-hour stop-work meetings, voting overwhelmingly to reject the IRC ruling. At several strike venues, they voted to defy the IRC by not returning to work, in some cases for up to 48 hours.

The IRC ruling is the direct outcome of the union's collaboration with both federal and state Labor governments. In January 2009, the

NSWTF cancelled a 48-hour strike that school and TAFE teachers had voted for just two months earlier. Behind closed doors, union officials reached a deal with the state Labor government for schools that was rammed through at a series of regional and local meetings.

The union-brokered deal formally overturned centralised staffing, agreeing that half of all appointments would be made by local principals. The shift to "school autonomy" is a central aspect of the federal Labor government's plans for a national education marketplace. Dismissal procedures were streamlined, sick leave halved and workers compensation entitlements substantially reduced.

None of the TAFE issues were resolved. Having divided TAFE teachers from their school counterparts, the union shunted the TAFE award into a joint union-government working party. The IRC ruling on October 15 was the outcome.

The assault on TAFE jobs and conditions in NSW is part of a broader national agenda. At its Council of Australian Government's (COAG) meeting on November 29 last year, the federal Labor government declared it would reward states that moved towards an "entitlement-based student demand-driven training system" i.e., towards an open market in vocational education.

The meaning of the COAG agreement is now on display in the state of Victoria. In July 2009, the Victorian Labor government put all vocational courses up for tender, forcing TAFE colleges to compete with private Registered Training Organisations. Victorian Premier John Brumby also announced plans to triple fees for a range of TAFE courses and introduce a Higher Education Contribution Scheme-style loan for students, a scheme similar to that operating in the nation's universities. Victoria is widely seen as blazing the trail for the restructuring of TAFE in the remaining states.

TAFE education, which provides a wide range of technical, vocational and adult education courses, has been systematically run down for decades. After a brief period of funding increases in the 1970s and early 1980s, colleges have been starved of funds while student enrolments have skyrocketed. By 1995 almost 1.3 million students were enrolled in TAFE courses, double the number at university.

By 1987, under the federal Hawke Labor government, TAFE fees had been re-introduced and colleges forced to undertake commercial activities and to compete for students with the growing number of

private Registered Training Organisations.

According to a 2006 report by the Australian Education Union “TAFE Futures”, state and territory governments contribute just 57 percent of funding nationally with the federal government providing a mere 22 percent. The result has been a reduction in course hours by up to 50 percent, a decline in support services such as student counselling and the casualisation of the workforce. In NSW, seven out of every ten TAFE teachers are now casual.

Currently TAFE colleges generate 21 percent of their funding internally through fees and charges levied on students. State and federal Labor governments are set to rapidly accelerate this cost-shifting away from government onto students, a process that has already taken place in the nation’s universities. In 1989, governments contributed 77 percent of university revenue, a figure that has since plummeted to 44 percent.

While federal Education Minister Julia Gillard claims Labor’s “education revolution” will spearhead a “training revolution”, the thrust of these “reforms” will be further inroads into TAFE education. In late 2007, the NSW Labor government unilaterally announced that it was downgrading TAFE teaching qualifications from a university diploma to a 90-hour level-four certificate, a move in line with its cost-cutting and “user-pays” policy.

The AEU and the NSWTF has no principled opposition to this pro-market agenda. The thrust of the AEU’s 2006 report was to accept that “TAFE fees are unlikely to be wound back.” The report’s chief concern was how TAFE education can be made competitive in an “open training market.”

Several teachers spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the erosion of TAFE education.

Margaret West teaches literacy and numeracy to TAFE students in inner Sydney:

“I really feel that the bottom line of the present government is to privatise education where they possibly can. The privatisation of education means that the money can be handed directly to big business which is what they’re starting to do with the various private Registered Training Organisations that are around. It’s really just a way of government giving big business money.

I teach literacy and numeracy. A lot of my students are people whose first language is not English. Others are English speakers who didn’t get a chance to get an education the first time around, trying to get their basic skills up to standard so they can go onto other study courses and get a job. We have a lot of people on pensions, such as the disability pension, trying to get back into the workforce, a lot of disadvantaged people. Some find it difficult to progress, others pick it up quite easily. But they have to be given a chance.

Over the last couple of years I’ve noticed how much more we’re expected to do within the same time. We have no administrative staff. We have to take our own messages. We interview new students. We do all the day-to-day running of our section; tick the boxes to prove we are accountable, and less time to do the preparation and the teaching that is clearly what our job should be.

The students are feeling a lot more pressure, too. Pressure to go into courses that will get them a job without the basic English skills necessary, particularly the people who are sent by Centrelink (federal government social security agency). The pressure on them is ridiculous. A lot of them have to apply for jobs as well as studying. Centrelink is constantly checking the attendance rolls and breaching them, cutting off their payments, over things such as sickness or family illness.

They’re also under growing financial pressures. A lot of our students can’t attend some TAFE lessons because they don’t have the money for fares. Unless they’re doing a full-time course, there’s no concession fare available to them.

Gerry White, a teacher working in the state’s west spoke about the impact of chronic funding cuts to TAFE: “From 1996 through the 11 years of the Howard government, TAFE NSW suffered a 25 percent reduction in its federal funding and the NSW Labor government cut us back by 30 percent. The funds that didn’t go to TAFE have been going out to tender, much of which TAFE is not allowed to tender for. The bottom line is that we’ve had successive budget cuts, resulting in us constantly being required to do more with less. This has resulted in over-sized classes and courses being cut, particularly for pre-employment programs in skill-shortages areas.

Despite the NSW Strategic Plan, which only came out 12 months ago, which claimed that certain areas like the unemployed, skill shortages in emerging industries would be quarantined, we’ve only had cut back after cut back. We struggle just to run our core apprentice and night-classes. In fact, there’ll be cuts again to night-classes this year. We’ve already lost most of our pre-employment classes.

The whole big picture is about money and proper funding for TAFE. If we had proper funding for TAFE there’d be proper funding to pay full-time teachers to offer courses for the correct length, to offer pre-employment programs, night-classes and the variety of courses we used to offer that we don’t have the money for.

One of the areas that has suffered the most are full-time teachers because full-time teachers get paid 52 weeks of the year, they get vacation pay, sick leave, they cost more than part-time casual teachers who are generally only paid for 36 weeks per year. That is why the number of full-time teachers has steadily decreased and with the number of teachers retiring in the next few years, it’s becoming critical.”



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