

Australia: Union prepares sell-out of TAFE teachers struggle

Our reporters
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Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers across the state of New South Wales (NSW) attended stop-work meetings convened yesterday by the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF). They voted for industrial action early next year to fight a new award handed down by the Industrial Relations Commission on October 15—but only “in the absence of a negotiated settlement” with the state Labor government. The union is seeking a deal with newly installed Premier Kristina Keneally that would preserve the central thrust of the IRC ruling.

TAFE teachers have responded angrily to the IRC-sanctioned award that includes provisions to increase the weekly teaching load by five hours, forcing them to work anytime between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m., Monday to Friday, and requiring them to teach “excess” hours even if they reach their annual allocated teaching load. The IRC ruling was not the decision of an “independent umpire”. It reflected the demands of the federal and state Labor governments for further sweeping TAFE “reforms”. Under the Rudd government’s “education revolution” the TAFE system must compete with private providers, while former Premier Nathan Rees and his education minister Verity Firth demanded savings of \$50 million annually over the next three years across an already under-funded system.

Spontaneous walkouts by TAFE teachers took place across dozens of colleges after the new award was handed down in mid-October. Mass meetings convened on November 10 were followed by further strike action in defiance of the IRC ruling. An estimated 70 percent of all TAFE teachers are employed on a part-time basis and the additional workload requirements for full-time teachers will mean the elimination of hundreds of jobs.

In response to what the media described as “wildcat” industrial action, Rees stepped into direct negotiations with the NSWTF. The union used the strikes as political leverage to attempt to reach a deal with the government. They are preparing a re-run of the sell-out public school teachers’ award imposed at the start of 2009. Then, a deal was reached behind

closed doors over the summer holidays and industrial action scheduled for the first week of the new school year was unilaterally cancelled. The union-government agreement that was subsequently rammed through at local union meetings overturned centralised staffing and axed basic entitlements.

During a televised broadcast to metropolitan and regional meetings yesterday, and in follow-up remarks to TAFE teachers gathered at the NSWTF auditorium, union president Bob Lipscombe revealed the union had been “within hours” of reaching a deal with Premier Nathan Rees. In a sure sign that a betrayal of the months-long TAFE teachers struggle is being prepared, Lipscombe and his fellow officials were completely silent on the content of that deal.

Lipscombe told TAFE teachers that “the government is in disarray and we have no real idea who will be the next Minister for Education and Training... No-one in the government knows what to do”. “The government is in a difficult position,” he said.

With the state government in turmoil, Lipscombe made clear that the NSWTF will work with Keneally and her newly appointed Industrial Relations Minister John Robertson.

Lipscombe told the meeting: “This morning Unions NSW has announced a new accord with the Keneally government. That announcement this morning will prove very useful to us. If the government is serious about that then TAFE is the place they can start.”

The “accord” to which Lipscombe referred is a “bond of co-operation” with the state Labor government announced by Unions NSW the previous day. The peak union body’s secretary Mark Lennon told the media: “The Premier, Kristina Keneally, has tasked the new Industrial Relations Minister, John Robertson, to work with Unions NSW to create the *Working Together* agreement.

“The document is intended to be a blueprint for promoting jobs, social justice and building the state’s economy. While we continue to have our differences with government as we

represent our members, there is genuine scope for us to work in closer co-operation with the State Government to minimise those tensions,” he said.

The announcement testifies to the complete reliance of the Keneally-led government on the trade union bureaucracy. They in turn are pledging to deepen their collaboration with the government—as they did under successive Accords with the federal Hawke and Keating Labor governments from 1983 to 1996—to drive up productivity through the elimination of jobs and conditions, a process euphemistically described as “building the state’s economy”.

The appointment of former Unions NSW boss John Robertson as Minister for Industrial Relations and Commerce (adding to his Energy and Public Sector Reform portfolios) is highly significant. These are key ministries, and will spearhead the Keneally government’s new assault on jobs and working conditions across the state. Lipscombe’s declaration that Robertson can start with TAFE must serve as a warning to all TAFE teachers.

Special mention must be made of the role played by the various petty-bourgeois protest organisations, including Solidarity and Socialist Alliance, who function as little more than an appendage of the trade union bureaucracy. At yesterday’s meeting one Solidarity member criticised what he described as a “lack of direction from the Federation” and called for further industrial action “to put the heat on the government”. He proceeded to vote for the official resolution, thereby backing the union’s plans for a “negotiated settlement” with the Labor government.

Far from the NSWTF lacking “direction”, the union leaders are the chief enablers of the Rudd government’s “education revolution”. The perspective of “putting heat on the government”—i.e., pressuring Labor to halt its attacks—is a complete dead-end as evidenced by Labor’s relentless pro-market assault on workers over the past two decades and more.

In order to prevent the imposition of a new award with far-reaching attacks on jobs and conditions, TAFE teachers must launch a unified political struggle against the Rudd and Keneally Labor governments and their accomplices in the NSWTF and Unions NSW. This is the inescapable conclusion from yesterday’s state-wide meetings, and from the sustained attacks on TAFE and public education under successive state and federal governments.

The Socialist Equality Party advocates a unified political and industrial campaign uniting teachers and general staff across TAFE, the public school system and universities, who are all reeling beneath the impact of Labor’s pro-market education reforms. The struggle of NSW TAFE teachers has broad ramifications. If TAFE teachers are defeated and the Labor government’s measures are imposed—either under a new “negotiated settlement” or the current award—a benchmark will be set threatening jobs and basic conditions throughout the

public sector.

Several TAFE teachers spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters at meetings in Surry Hills, Granville and Dee Why. Jenny Steel from Granville TAFE bitterly denounced the Labor governments for carrying through “a very well executed plan to destroy TAFE teachers”.

“This has not been a fair negotiation, or a so-called win-win situation. The government has gone back to the master-servant relationship. This is only the beginning. Next the government will put all schoolteachers on the same kind of administrative hours—working 35 hours a week all year long.

“The Labor Party is dead in NSW and federally. They haven’t supported the little man at all. The state education minister Verity Firth, who is from Labor’s ‘left’, has refused to even talk to us. There has been no response and no communication. This has been a very negative experience. In the beginning I never thought it would happen under a Labor government.

“The government has demoralised a very productive workforce. A lot of TAFE teachers will lose their work-lifestyle balance and that will lead to a huge dropout. Then the government will bring in less-qualified Certificate 4 teachers with no university qualifications.

“Labor’s ‘education revolution’ is about making us compete with the private sector. But that is impossible for TAFE, because we have so many bureaucratic overheads and the private providers have worse conditions for teachers.

“Education should be for all. At Granville we are so multicultural. Some of our students have fled from war and poverty overseas and they need TLC [tender love and care]. The private providers don’t give that. These kids deserve a chance. So this is a breakdown in society as well.”

Steel was critical of the deal struck by the NSW Teachers Federation and the state government last January, which gave up basic conditions in return for a supposed wage rise, and left the TAFE teachers isolated. “They should never have taken the money in January. Lipscombe was rolled by the government, and then by the NSW Industrial Relations Commission. We got nothing.”



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