

Australia: TAFE teachers challenge Labor's education reforms, defying strike ban

Our reporters
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More than 3,000 Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers attended a stop-work meeting yesterday—the largest in more than a decade—at Sydney Town Hall. The action formed part of a 24-hour strike by the TAFE education sector's 10,000-strong workforce across the Australian state of New South Wales. Teachers are opposing a new award being enforced by the state Labor government of Premier Kristina Keneally.

Opposition to Labor's education reforms is mounting, but the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) and Unions NSW are working to head off a direct political struggle against the state and federal Labor governments. The NSWTF is calling for a “negotiated settlement” with Premier Keneally, even as her government makes clear it will press ahead with a series of sweeping attacks across the TAFE and public school sectors.

Labor's TAFE reforms aim to reduce spending by more than \$50 million annually over the next five years, threatening hundreds of jobs. The measures are an integral part of Rudd and Gillard's “education revolution” that will devastate an already under-funded system and give a further boost to privately-run vocational training providers that have flourished over the past two decades.

In October, TAFE teachers staged “wild-cat” strikes at several institutes after the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) handed down a new award. It included provisions to increase the weekly teaching load by five hours, forcing TAFE teachers to work anytime between 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday to Saturday, and requiring them to teach “excess” teaching hours even if they reach their annual allocated teaching load.

Yesterday's strike, which included a series of regional stop-work meetings across the state, saw teachers defy the Keneally government and the NSW Industrial Relations Commission for the third time in less than four months. The IRC last week issued orders banning industrial action by TAFE's workforce for three months.

“We see this as an illegal strike,” Keneally declared on Tuesday. The Labor government took out paid advertisements across commercial radio, television and print media, describing TAFE teachers as “the best paid in the country” and branding their strike action as “unwarranted” and “illegal”.

Labor's Education Minister Verity Firth said the government was investigating the possibility of fining the NSWTF. “There is a point of

principle here,” she declared. “We do not support industrial chaos.”

Installed as leader in a backroom party coup by Labor's right-wing cabal just two months ago, Keneally has made clear that she will enforce both the Rudd government's pro-market education reforms and its draconian industrial relations regime. On Tuesday she repeated her demand that teachers abide by the IRC's October ruling: “We urge TAFE teachers to follow the direction of the Commission, to abide by the ruling of the independent umpire, the IRC, and accept the Supreme Court's ruling on the matter.”

Far from the IRC being an “independent umpire”, its new award has been framed in accord with the Rudd government's national TAFE reforms. Labor aims to establish uniform conditions across TAFE and public school systems previously regulated by the states.

Reflecting TAFE teachers' anger and defiance, yesterday's strike meetings overwhelmingly endorsed further industrial action against Labor's new award, though the content of this action was not specified. The NSWTF, however, has no intention of prosecuting a struggle in defence of TAFE teachers' conditions. Proceedings in the IRC over the past two months have served to underscore the union's direct complicity and responsibility for Labor's assault.

The IRC's ruling on February 5—ordering the NSWTF to “cease and refrain from authorising, organising, supporting, encouraging or inciting industrial action, for a period of three months” in connection with the new award—included a statement by Commission President Justice Roger Boland that the NSWTF had no right to oppose the new TAFE award, as the union had already agreed to deliver the necessary productivity efficiencies being demanded by the Department.

It is worth quoting in full this section of Boland's judgement:

a. In January 2009, in return for a salary increase of 12 per cent over three years, the Federation agreed that in order to fund the salary increase beyond 2.5 per cent per annum it would *commit to identifying and implementing further employee related reform measures and cost savings to improve TAFE operational efficiency and competitiveness* in addition to measures already agreed upon. The Federation agreed that *direct teaching hours would constitute one of the reform measures* to be the subject of negotiations.

b. The Federation also agreed, in terms that constituted a consent provision of the Award, that in the event the parties to the negotiations

were unable to identify the necessary employee related reform measures and cost savings, or should any dispute arise during the process, *the parties acknowledge and commit to take all necessary steps so that the Industrial Relations Commission shall arbitrate on and determine the employee related cost savings necessary to fund the salary increases under the Award.* [Emphasis added.]

In other words, as early as January 2009, the teachers' union had already effectively agreed to the conditions contained in the new award.

Boland's remarks also underscore that the IRC's October award was framed by Rudd Labor's assault on public education nationally. "The Full Bench found that TAFE operated in a highly competitive environment and was in competition with both interstate TAFE Institutes and private RTOs [Registered Training Organisations] for the training and vocational education dollar. It was accepted by the Full Bench that TAFE NSW's ability to offer quality educational services that were cost effective was essential to its ongoing viability."

At yesterday's Sydney Town Hall mass meeting, resolutions from the floor called for indefinite state-wide industrial action to fight the new award and a no-confidence censure motion against the IRC.

NSWTF President Bob Lipscombe opposed these proposals. The union is calling on TAFE teachers to write to Keneally and their local parliamentarian, in order to pressure Labor to the negotiating table. The sole concern of the NSWTF is to preserve their role as the government's industrial middle-men, while preventing any challenge to Labor's attacks on public education and heading off any independent struggle by TAFE teachers against the Keneally and Rudd governments.

The TAFE teachers' struggle in defence of decent wages and conditions is a struggle against the state and federal Labor governments—and against the NSWTF. TAFE staff ought to elect rank-and-file committees of trusted teachers to advance their campaign, turning to other sections of the working class now confronting similar attacks, in the first instance with those throughout the public education sector, including the schools and universities.

This campaign can only proceed to the extent that it is based on a new and independent political orientation. A high quality and accessible public education system, with decent wages and conditions for teachers and administrative staff, is incompatible with the "free market" program being advanced by the Labor Party on behalf of big business. What is required is nothing less than the revolutionary reorganisation of society along socialist lines.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to TAFE teachers at the Sydney Town Hall mass meeting. Many teachers have already had their hourly pay rate significantly reduced—some by up to \$10 an hour—as a result of the new award.

Gabriele, head of Hairdressing at Nepean College said: "Our interest

is in our students. We invest a lot of time in them. The TAFE system is there for ordinary people. Every person in Australia deserves the same opportunity, not just the rich. The government is looking to privatisation, they are trying to do away with the TAFE system. It's all about money, investment in private colleges, and ripping the TAFE system apart."

Holly, a teacher in Adult Basic Education at Ultimo TAFE said: "Teachers are being run ragged. The system is no longer student centred. It's more about meeting targets and profits—not about the individual progress of the student, but about money and bums on seats. It's terrible for the students. A lot of what we provide is for students who missed out in life, or who had difficult upbringings, or school wasn't for them. TAFE is their last resort, where they can learn in a more informal adult environment.

"If we don't get enough student numbers the classes go. More and more of my colleagues who are casual teachers are being forced out by having their hours reduced, in many cases to 8 hours a week or less. We are going the same way as the UK. The same thing happened there about 10 years ago."

Harry and Lee are from the Sydney Institute. When asked what he thought of Premier Keneally's claim that TAFE teachers were the highest paid in Australia, Harry said that she was being malicious. "She is trying to isolate teachers as some sort of elite group," he explained. "She is trying to isolate us from other workers and create a negative image for TAFE teachers in general. Seventy percent of TAFE teachers are casual, and for 11 weeks of the year they are not paid. We are also not paid for subject preparation, which in many cases can take up to two weeks. What they are planning is that TAFE will be just another vocational training provider competing with private colleges. Some of these colleges pay their teachers far less than TAFE teachers. We think that is the perspective of the government."

"The students now pay more for less education," Lee said. "It's about business, not education or training. The demands on full-time teachers will ultimately affect the students. One of the issues we have been discussing between ourselves is that a lot of the hours taught by casual teachers will be shifted to full-time teachers. There will be an impact on education quality, as a lot of part-time teachers are industry professionals and provide insight and information not immediately available to some full-time teachers.

"The union doesn't support casual teachers, and gone are the days when full-time teachers had permanent tenure. A lot of full-time teachers are on short contracts. One of my colleagues has had two one-year contracts, and this year his contract has been renewed for just six months, until the end of the semester. This union is negotiating with the very government that is pushing these attacks, and now they tell us that the only option is to go to Premier Keneally."



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