

Australia: Teachers' union pushes through TAFE sell-out

Our reporters
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Despite vocal opposition by considerable numbers of teachers at meetings yesterday, the NSW Teachers Federation pushed through a “settlement” that finally imposes the state Labor government’s demands for longer working hours and lower overall pay rates on Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers in New South Wales (NSW).

The sellout—after TAFE teachers had earlier defied threats by the NSW government and Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) to strike three times in four months—also directly facilitates the federal Labor government’s “education revolution”. A central component of that program is to slash teachers’ conditions nationally by boosting profit-making private vocational training providers at the expense of the public TAFE colleges.

There was a substantial “no” vote against the deal struck between the union and the state government of Premier Kristina Keneally. The union refused to release details of the overall vote, but claimed a “clear majority” at the state-wide meetings had voted in favour. It is known that the Newcastle meeting voted 66 to 51 against, and that a third of the central Sydney meeting voted no—58 to 130.

This level of opposition is significant. It points to a wider rebellion brewing against the Labor governments and their union partners, which are enforcing the demands of big business that working people, not the corporate elite, pay the price of the global financial crisis. Teachers opposed to the sellout picketed the entrance to the meeting at the union’s Sydney headquarters. The slogans on their “Vote NO!” placards included: “Don’t destroy TAFE”, “Vote for the future” and “Peace in our time is not good enough”.

Just a month earlier, on February 12, at Sydney Town Hall more than 3,000 TAFE teachers had attended the largest stop-work meeting in more than a decade and overwhelmingly endorsed further industrial action against a new work award being enforced by the Keneally government. They defied an IRC order outlawing industrial action by TAFE workers, and threats of fines by Education Minister Verity Firth to punish their “illegal strike”.

Terrified by these signs of militancy, the union appealed to the Labor government for a “negotiated settlement”. The ensuing backroom talks with Keneally produced an agreement that left the industrial award intact, but augmented by “administrative arrangements”.

Teachers’ working hours will still be extended by five hours a week, although the extra hours can be completed off-site, including at home, “subject to TAFE business needs”. Actual teaching hours per week can be pushed above a cap of 30 if “the teacher agrees in writing to teach more than 30 hours to meet TAFE business needs”. Teachers remain required to

work anytime between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m., Monday to Saturday. They can take up to 20 hours per year off teaching for “approved” professional development, but only if that “meets the needs” of their individual TAFE Institute. There was one concession: the government dropped its demand that if teachers take long-service leave that spans a vacation, they lose their vacation time.

Overall, these measures amount to a 20 percent increase in workloads in return for nominal annual pay rises of 4 percent. The government aims to reduce spending by more than \$50 million annually over the next five years, which will inevitably lead to the destruction of hundreds of full-time and casual jobs and a lowering of the quality of education for students. The agreement’s emphasis on TAFE’s “business needs” points to the underlying process whereby the Labor governments are forcing TAFE colleges to compete for “business” with each other and with private operators.

The union refused to convene another Town Hall meeting, and instead held scattered video-link meetings. During the opening video broadcast to the meetings, union president Bob Lipscombe and vice president Geoff Turnbull claimed that the settlement negotiated with the government was a victory. Turnbull proclaimed: “We have won!” The hostile response in question time then forced union officials to resort to threats that if teachers rejected the deal, they would face serious legal and political consequences.

At the Sydney meeting, after a teacher won applause for denouncing the settlement as an “historic loss,” Lipscombe declared: “Nothing will shift the government. Not a one-day strike, not a two-day strike. Are you confident of indefinite action?” At the Newcastle meeting, union organiser Chris Freestone answered an interjection that he was “working for her [Premier Keneally]” by warning that “there are significant fines” and “the union can be fined out of existence”. He revealed that “there have been threats of deregistration”.

Freestone also insisted that if the government backed down, it would lose the next election, and that would mean an anti-union Liberal government, “even worse than the present Labor state government”. In reality, Labor and Liberal are both parties of big business, with a common agenda to slash public services and working class conditions. The Labor governments are actually carrying out measures that go beyond anything attempted by previous state or federal Liberal governments.

Throughout the meetings in central Sydney and Newcastle there were interjections and objections to the union’s treachery, but no opposed political perspective was advanced. There was no mention of the wider war on public education and teachers launched by federal Education Minister Julia Gillard and no call for a political struggle against the Labor

governments. At the Sydney meeting, one speaker against the deal posed the question: “Where do we go from here?”

The inability of any of those opposed to the sellout to answer the question points to the opposition’s weakness: the lack of an alternative perspective with which to wage a political fight against the state and federal Labor governments and their accomplices, the trade unions.

The union has been complicit in Labor’s assault on TAFE teachers from the start. As the IRC’s February 5 ruling made clear, the union effectively agreed to the new award conditions in January 2009, when it committed to “identifying and implementing further employee related reform measures and cost savings,” including “direct teaching hours” and submitting to IRC arbitration.

The first step in any struggle to defend TAFE jobs and conditions is a fundamental break with the trade unions. TAFE teachers have to create rank-and-file committees and link up with other sections of the working class facing similar attacks, including students and parents, school and university teachers and public health workers.

This will necessarily involve a political struggle against both the Keneally and Rudd governments, whose pro-market agenda has already seriously undermined public education at all levels. Deputy Prime Minister Gillard spelled out Labor’s blueprint for vocational education and training in a speech to business leaders last March. She outlined a “student entitlement model”—effectively a voucher system—and praised the Victorian state Labor government for permitting private operators to undercut their public TAFE rivals by charging lower enrolment fees.

The struggle against Labor’s pro-business program can go forward only if it is guided by a socialist perspective. High quality and free public education to meet the needs of all students, with decent wages and conditions for teachers and administrative staff, cannot be achieved without the reorganisation of society along socialist lines.

WSWS correspondents spoke to teachers at the Sydney meeting.

Les Dennelly, who led a group of Ultimo TAFE teachers campaigning for a “no” vote, said: “This is the same offer we had before. There’s been no change. Not since the Great Depression have people been forced to work extra time for less money. Michael Coutts-Trotter (the NSW director-general of education) says we have received a pay increase. But if you take into account the fact that we have to work an extra five hours a week, we have received a pay cut of close to \$8 an hour.

“This is an attack on the TAFE system—trying to cut down and reduce costs. The only way the government can do it is by attacking the working conditions of the people who make this system work. They also want to reduce the time that students spend in the colleges. They just want to use a kick and flick mentality, where the students are not trained properly; they’re trained on the job.”

Commenting on the Rudd government’s drive to privatise vocational education, Dennelly said: “We have already seen what happens when you leave it up to the private providers. They don’t provide the service that they should. The government is bringing in university-style fees, like they already have in Victoria. But public education is funded by public money, and should therefore be free of any charges. You can’t expect an apprentice to pay that kind of money.”

Discussing the role of the union, Dennelly said: “There were no

negotiations over the award, just over how it would be implemented. It was capitulation by the union from the start. This dispute only began because the members went outside the union.” He described how his college and others had launched their own strikes against the award last October.

“We voted to strike every fortnight for 10 weeks, and we notified the department. The union then got called into the IRC and told to call off the strikes. Fortunately, the membership had voted that we couldn’t call off the strikes without a vote. The union sent a delegation down to the branch, asking us to cancel the strikes so that the negotiations could go ahead. The union and the department were both terrified, so they went straight to the IRC. It’s not the members that are letting us down.”

A graphic design and multi-media teacher from western Sydney said she ended up voting “yes” even though the outcome of the dispute was “pretty terrible”. She condemned the manner in which the union had agreed in the IRC to cut its members’ conditions. “We never knew what would go to the IRC. It was all kept under wraps. It just seemed to come out of nowhere. As far as I’m concerned, the IRC is in league with the government anyway.

“In my 30 years of working full-time, I have never seen this kind of reversal of conditions, and I’ve also worked in lots of industries and the public service. I have never seen a union roll over like this. Not even Terry Metherell [former Liberal state education minister] and Nick Greiner [former premier] could have done this.

“Now Labor is deskilling everyone, and devaluing technical education. I can see them cutting TAFE to ribbons all the time. It’s kind of weird that it’s a Labor government doing this. What’s happening? What’s the difference between Labor and Liberal? It seems it is only fine degrees, if that!”

The graphic design teacher said she voted yes because she could see no alternative except a prolonged strike. She had no confidence in the union, and doubted the willingness of teachers to sustain an indefinite strike. “I wanted to abstain,” she said. “It’s like being between a rock and a hard place.”

“I’m very angry about the way education has become a commodity. Head teachers have even become line managers, and look at you askance if you take time off ill. I am wild in every way about the commercialisation of education. It looks like that is what the Rudd government’s ‘education revolution’ is all about, what with the *My School* website and league tables naming ‘non-performing’ schools.”



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