

Australia: Vote ‘no’ to the NSWTF salaries agreement! Form rank-and-file committees to defend public education

The Committee For Public Education
4 December 2019

New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) bureaucrats are attempting to impose yet another sell-out Salaries and Conditions deal for the state’s 60,000 public school teachers.

At 8.30 a.m., teachers will arrive for the December 5th stop-work meetings at hundreds of different venues across the state. These meetings are designed to split and isolate teachers and prevent them from hearing their colleagues’ views on the latest award.

Teachers will be forced to listen to a “live broadcast” from union bureaucrats, which will be limited to what the NSWTF executives think teachers should hear. The latter will not have been given any opportunity to read and scrutinise the award conditions under which they will have to work for the next two years. Nevertheless, they will be expected to vote on whatever the executive resolution declares, before they are required to be back at school by 10.30 a.m.

What a flagrant violation of teachers’ democratic rights!

Those present at this meeting should cast their minds back to the 2016–2019 award stop-work meetings. Union members were given a one-page “heads of agreement” as they entered, containing five dot-points that supposedly summarised the content of the deal, reached in closed door negotiations between the union and the Education Department. The meetings lasted less than an hour, with union officials insisting that their members ratify the agreement without any opportunity to scrutinise its contents.

Why the rush to hold a stop-work meeting now? It has nothing to do with the interests of teachers and everything to do with the NSWTF’s desperation to ram through yet another regressive award, and thus enable union dues to be raised at the start of 2020.

The NSWTF has pledged to secure “real salaries growth and defend existing conditions.” It claims that its negotiations on the 2020–22 Salaries and Conditions award with the Department of Education and Communities (DEC) will be driven by “teachers’ voices.” What a farce!

For the last two decades or more, “teachers’ voices” have been systematically suppressed throughout the school system. Decisions on curriculum, pedagogy, staffing, resources, and all other aspects of education are dictated by the Department, business, government and then implemented via agreements policed by the union.

From the outset, NSWTF President Maurie Mulheron ruled out challenging the paltry 2.5 percent salary cap imposed in the midst

of the global financial crisis by the state Labor government, and continued since by successive Liberal state governments. The cap has, across the NSW public sector service, saved the government more than \$4 billion since 2011. The trade unions, with the NSWTF playing a critical role, have functioned as the key mechanism for imposing smaller wage rises, described by a Reserve Bank of Australia spokesman recently as “the new normal.”

Mulheron’s declaration is in opposition to teachers’ overwhelming support, as revealed by a 2018 survey on salaries, for genuine pay rises to offset cost of living increases in electricity, fuel, food, groceries and skyrocketing house prices. The NSWTF settlement with the DEC further underscores its contempt for teachers—they have agreed to an amount even lower than the cap for 2021, 2.28 percent!

As for defending existing working conditions, Australian public school teachers face higher workloads, fewer resources and more administrative duties than global averages, according to a recent OECD report. And excessive workloads are driving younger teachers out of the profession at unprecedented rates. Existing working conditions are the result of ever-increasing school populations, with no equivalent growth in teacher staffing and education support staff. Yet teachers face larger class sizes, ever-increasing testing and data collection, and excessive administrative responsibilities, including complex work demands dealing with students who express a range of learning, social and emotional problems.

The real voices of teachers were expressed in a 2018 survey of NSW teachers’ workloads. Teachers typically responded, “The workload is insane!”, “The amount of paperwork I need to complete is unachievable!”

Moreover, far from keeping teachers informed on the union-DEC talks on salaries, the NSWTF has consciously set out to mislead them into believing that, while it was “impossible” to challenge the 2.5 percent cap, their workload would be improved through the union’s fight for “thousands more teachers.”

Does any teacher believe that the NSWTF, which has consistently refused to fight against the salaries cap, will wage a struggle against the state government’s ever-increasing “efficiency” dividend: i.e., meaning that DEC will have its future operating budget cut by 2 percent per annum?

The union's claim that more teachers will be employed, and existing teachers' work load reduced, is so much hot air. The union is also hoping that teachers have forgotten that the Salaries and Conditions agreement, due to expire December 31, was disconnected from the Staffing award in recent years. In other words, the Staffing agreement, mooted to be extended until 2021, has nothing to do with the Salaries award on which teaching are currently voting. Extending the present staffing agreement for a further year will mean teachers' appalling working conditions will continue, handing over further savings to the government.

As for the existing pay anomaly, affecting up to 5,000, mostly young, teachers that emerged in the transition to a new pay scale, it was created by the DEC/NSWTF and it should be fixed at government expense, including paying affected teachers appropriate back pay. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) condemned the transition from payment according to years of experience, to pay rises tied to the acquisition of "standards," as a veiled step towards paying teachers for their students' test results.

It is time to put a stop to the reactionary assault on public education. What next after NAPLAN, *My School*, *Bump it Up*, *Stronger HSC Standards*, Performance Development Plans, streamlined teacher dismissals, contract teachers, Local Schools Local Decisions, abolition of transfer rights, awarding principals hiring rights and now stretch targets?

The SEP and the Committee for Public Education call on teachers to make a break from the NSWTF, which has orchestrated countless sell-outs of teachers and public education. Educators must begin drawing the lessons of the straitjacket into which they have been forced over the past four decades. A genuine fight to defend and expand public education requires a 180 degree turn away from these fossilised organisations.

In their assault on public education, however, the NSWTF is dependent on pseudo-lefts such as Ademir Hajdarpasic and John Morris, who work in and around the union to create illusions that they can be pressured into defending the interests of teachers. Hajdarpasic recently wrote a piece for the Democratic Socialist of America's *Jacobin*, titled "Teacher Resistance Comes to Australia." Hajdarpasic lauded the "right priorities" of the NSWTF and its promise to fight for permanent jobs. He hailed the victories of the Chicago Teachers Union as a way forward for teachers. In fact, the struggles of teachers across the US emerged independently of the teacher unions, which worked to isolate their members and strangle their strike action.

John Morris, a former Socialist Alliance member, now describes himself as a "teacher activist." He recently stood for the position of president of the NSWTF on a platform of breaking the 2.5 percent salary cap. Underscoring teachers' support for higher pay, Morris only narrowly lost the presidential election by a few hundred votes. Yet at the November 26, 2019 Council delegates' meeting, which voted on the NSWTF executive recommendation on salaries, including the acceptance of the 2.5 percent salary cap, Morris sat silently, making no attempt to speak or to oppose the recommendation. Later in the meeting, Morris resumed his "left" stance, speaking against the privatisation of public assets, on a motion worded to obligate no one to do anything.

Throughout the world, teachers are coming to the forefront of the

fight against government austerity and levels of inequality not seen since the 1930s depression. Broad sections of society rightly see the ongoing destruction of public schooling as part of a social counterrevolution by the financial elites and political establishment, which includes the gutting of healthcare services, proliferation of low-paid, part-time labour and the devastating growth of social inequality. The developing movement of teachers in Morocco, Algeria, Zimbabwe, Germany, Portugal, Chile, Mexico and the US is an initial expression of a rebellion that will inevitably spread into broader layers of the working class.

The CFPE calls on teachers to begin to organise independent rank-and-file committees in all schools, made up of the most self-sacrificing and trusted teachers. Teachers require new organisations of struggle, democratically controlled by rank-and-file educators themselves, to fight for what teachers, support staff and their children need, not what big business politicians claim is affordable. It is only through such bodies, independent of, and in political opposition to, the agenda of the unions, that teachers' voices will be heard. Such committees should aim to unite with teachers throughout the state, nationally and internationally, on the basis of an anti-capitalist and socialist program, to end the subordination of education and all social needs to the profit interests of the banks and major corporations.

We urge all teachers who agree with this statement to email the CFPE or call 02 8218 3222 to become actively involved in this vital political initiative. Click here to reach the Committee for Public Education Facebook page.

The author also recommends:

Bullied teachers reveal complicity in victimisations
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