

Australia: New South Wales public school teachers continue to express outrage over union betrayal

Our reporters
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Teachers on the 2012-2015 Teachers NSW Facebook social media site are continuing to express their anger over the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) 2020-2021 Salaries and Conditions award, which was pushed through at stop-work meetings on December 5. Some have publicly announced they intend to resign from the union, denouncing the agreement as a sell-out.

In the deal reached between the NSWTF and the NSW Department of Education, the union claimed to have resolved a pay “anomaly” that emerged in the transition from the Common Incremental Scale (CIS)—the long-established system of pay according to seniority—to Standards Based Remuneration (SBR), in which pay rises are tied to the acquisition of “standards.” During the course of the transition, some 5,000 mainly young teachers whose employment commenced during 2012-2015 lost up to \$50,000 in remuneration, with no possibility of back pay.

President Maurie Mulheron asserted: “The anomaly has been resolved once and for all.” Teachers are incensed by this false claim.

Writing on the 2012-2015 NSW Teachers Facebook page, Dane responded: “Many of the teachers impacted by this will get nothing out of the resolution and the Federation sold it as a ‘win.’” Nadia replied, “Totally agree! Incredibly disappointed by the whole process. No transparency, no questions answered and told to vote for a terrible agreement. 2.5 percent for only 1 year of the agreement, no clarity on the pay anomaly and now we are being asked to fight next year for what should have been in the agreement! No wonder members are disillusioned.” Sandra wrote: “I feel like having a mass walk-out of the union.”

Others voiced their disgust at the way the vote had been rushed through. Michael posted: “They railroaded the meeting and the vote.” Austin commented: “Anomalies are not resolved and we were painted into a corner to vote for the motion.” Adam added: “1,000 percent dictatorship. Vote yes or you get nothing.”

Numbers of teachers have posted their resignation from the union on the social media site. One wrote: “I would like to end my membership of the teachers federation, this is due to what I, and everyone else in my situation believe to be the unfair and divisive action the federation has taken by sidelining 2012-2016 teachers, and bullying all federation members into voting for a resolution which has not been resolved...”

Standards Based Remuneration was one a range of measures contained in the Local Schools Local Decisions (LSLD) program introduced by the Barry O’Farrell Liberal-National Party state government in 2012 and implemented over a five-year timeframe. The plan devolved power over most financial decisions to principals. LSLD was the state version of the “Empowering Local Schools” program of the federal Labor government of then Prime Minister Julia Gillard, who called for every school in the country to be “self-managed” by 2018.

The school autonomy blueprint was part of the Rudd government’s pro-market “Education Revolution,” which was aimed at cutting government spending costs. In the neighbouring state of Victoria, which first introduced local autonomy, 50 percent of new teachers are employed on temporary or casual conditions as principals seek to meet shrinking budgets. Since LSLD was introduced in NSW, casual or contract employment of teachers has soared by 40 percent.

The Socialist Equality Party opposed the move to standards-based pay, describing it as a veiled measure to introduce the teacher pay for student test performance model that is widely in place in the United States and United Kingdom (see: “Quality teaching and the Labor/union assault on public education”).

The NSWTF, conscious of the long history of teacher opposition to performance pay, sold the move to SBR as a “win.” It claimed it would protect teachers from attempts to lower the status and salary of the profession by reducing qualification requirements.

This is completely bogus. Governments in the US and the UK, as well as the NSW government, have unilaterally downgraded teacher qualifications. Over the past decade, education ministries in the UK and various US states have permitted unqualified teachers into classrooms at increasing rates. It is highly unlikely that Australian school principals will not follow their international counterparts, as government spending on public education continues to decline.

A precedent has already been set in the case of NSW Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers. In 2007, the NSW Education Department announced the downgrading of teacher qualifications from a university level teaching degree to a Certificate 4 accreditation, with the NSWTF quickly falling into line.

Moreover, each school’s principal—not the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA)—is authorised to determine whether or not teachers have acquired the “standards” under SBR and therefore have the requirements to teach or go up the salary scale.

Just as their international counterparts have been under budgetary pressures to replace more expensive older teachers with lower paid casual or temporary younger teachers, Australian school principals will likewise be able to hire unqualified or lesser qualified staff at lower pay rates.

As an additional sweetener, the union announced that the transition to SBR would allow classroom teachers to reach “a six-figure salary within seven years rather than taking nine years under the Common Incremental Salary Scale.” It is hardly rocket science to work out that if some teachers are able to get to the top of the scale faster than others, inequities will occur. The reality is the NSWTF were so determined to push through SBR that they regarded the teachers who would be adversely affected as simply collateral

damage.

Teachers on the NSW 2012-2015 Facebook page are debating the way forward in the wake of this betrayal. Some think the NSWTF is a bad apple and other unions are better fighters. Others hope the union can be reformed. The reality is that the NSWTF, like the Australian Education Union, is committed to enforcing the acceleration of the pro-corporate agenda for public education.

The betrayal over the pay anomaly has exposed once again the contempt of union bureaucrats for their membership. The chief concern of the NSWTF and its counterparts is that it retains a formal role in implementing the regressive education agenda that federal and state governments are determined to impose.

Social media has provided the possibility for teachers’ anger to be voiced, despite the attempts of the union to suppress their concerns. This outrage expresses growing militancy and opposition among teachers in Australia and internationally. It must become part of a broader campaign among education employees, parents and students.

Teachers are faced with two alternatives. Either the NSWTF will remain in control and continue to enforce the assault on public education and teachers’ working conditions. This will result in the downgrading of teacher qualifications and the widening of already stark inequities in Australia’s school system.

Or teachers and staff in schools, universities and TAFEs can take matters into their own hands and form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and led by the most self-sacrificing and trusted teachers. It is only through such bodies that teachers’ voices will be heard and a struggle developed to fight for what educators and their students need—not what big business politicians claim is affordable.

We urge all those who agree with this perspective to contact the CFPE at sep@sep.org.au or call 02 8218 3222 and become actively involved in this vital political initiative.



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