

Australia: Walgett teachers walk off the job over staffing shortages

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Teachers at the Walgett Community College in northwestern New South Wales (NSW) walked off the job in protest at significant staffing issues last week. Currently, 11 out of 21 teaching positions remain unfilled at the school, creating intolerable conditions for staff and students.

The walkout is a sign of deepening discontent among teachers across the state and nationally. The Walgett teachers held a meeting before school last Wednesday and resolved to “down tools” at the commencement of classes. They returned to work after 20 minutes.

Major teacher shortages are being reported throughout NSW. At the beginning of this school year, 1,250 permanent positions remain unfilled, on top of unfilled temporary and casual teacher vacancies.

These shortages, caused by years of public education under-funding by both Labor and Liberal-National governments, have created a disaster that is impacting on the ability of schools, towns and regions to function.

Walgett is a remote rural town with a population of 2,145, about 70 percent of whom are Aboriginal. The district around the town, Walgett Shire, has a population of around 6,000.

Walgett’s pre-school, primary and high schools were re-structured in 2003 into the Walgett Community College (WCC), with 124 enrolments reported on the school website this year. The high school campus offers two trade training centres that deliver courses in hospitality, metal and engineering, and construction. It also runs a range of programs, as part of a government “Connected Communities” strategy to try to strengthen the educational outcomes for Aboriginal students.

Walgett has significant social problems, with few jobs and high numbers of vulnerable children. During the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment has exploded in the north-west region of NSW, going from an average of 2.5 percent in the two years prior to November 2020 to 9.5

percent in December 2020 and 8.9 percent in January 2021. Methamphetamine (ice) addiction is rife. Walgett and nearby Coonamble have recorded rates of non-domestic assault higher than 1,000 per 100,000 people—more than double the state average.

The WCC has had a troubled past, with a frequent turnover of principals. Currently only 11 percent of students attend the school more than 90 percent of the time. A number of violent incidents have placed staff in physical danger. According to a *Sydney Morning Herald* report late last year, a student put a speaker cable around a teacher’s neck and threatened to kill him, and a pregnant teacher recently had to stop a fight involving a knife.

The week before the walkout, the teachers had appealed to the Education Department, saying that inadequate staffing made the school unsafe and left them unable to deliver the curriculum adequately. In addition, staff shortages have forced the merging of classes. The merger of the “intellectually mild” class and the behaviour disorder class was of particular concern because it created the potential for unmanageable situations to arise.

Since 2012, as a consequence of the discredited Local Schools, Local Decisions policy (LSLD), the Education Department’s staffing unit has been significantly cut back, with the responsibility for staffing foisted onto individual principals. LSLD also undermined the statewide transfer system, seriously affecting many hard-to-staff schools, especially in rural and remote communities.

The LSLD autonomy model eliminated 800 curriculum support positions in the department’s central office and devolved many financial decisions to school principals. Thousands of permanent teaching positions were replaced by casual and temporary appointments as cost-cutting measures. LSLD also tied teachers’ pay rises to meeting “standards”—a step toward pay for “student performance.”

Teachers opposed the introduction of LSLD, with

50,000 defying a strike ban in 2012 to protest against it, but that action was betrayed by the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF). As part of the LSLD program, teacher dismissal procedures were fast-tracked, assisted by a call by the trade union for a special task force to facilitate the removal of so-called underperforming teachers.

This year the state Liberal-National Party government has replaced LSLD with a “School Success Model” that aims to further cut costs. With student enrolments forecast to grow by 20 percent over the next 15 years, and 25 percent over the next 20 years, the teacher shortage crisis is set to worsen.

The gutting of funding and services support is driving schools, teachers and communities to the breaking point. The recently released findings of the Gallop Inquiry, initiated by the NSWTF, revealed that while the dedication and commitment of teachers remained high, there had been profound changes in the volume and complexity of their work, leading to unsustainable workloads. Principals are working, on average, 62 hours a week while teachers are working 55 hours a week, attempting to meet the needs of students while dealing with the education department’s increasing compliance and administration burden.

One teacher from rural NSW told the WSWS: “The conditions that teachers and students face in schools all over rural NSW are difficult. The social crises in these areas are marked by historic levels of unemployment and underemployment. Drug and alcohol issues, crime and mental health issues all impact the youth in the most distressing ways imaginable.

“These young people, among the most vulnerable in the country, are then placed into the care of schools that are underfunded, and drastically understaffed, all but ensuring that these difficult conditions remain. The teachers who make their way into these areas, who are very often beginning teachers, find themselves bearing the full weight of the social crisis without access to the specialist support that these young people require.”

Growing teacher frustration and anger is being expressed in walkouts like those at Walgett, and at the Murrumbidgee Regional High School in Griffith last December over unbearable workloads and other chronic problems resulting from a merger.

Recently a teacher posted on the NSWTF Facebook page saying: “We need help now. I have never felt so overwhelmed at this time of year. Everyone I have spoken to feels the same. I already have parents going off, staff

losing it and kids being totally disrespectful... it is only week 5... swamped with admin, problem children, not enough time to actually enjoy time with my year 4’s along with PAT testing, programming etc... it is simply too much. It needs fixing now.”

Teachers should put no faith in the trade unions to lead any struggle to defend educators. The NSWTF is feigning support for some school walkouts, while keeping them confined to short protests as a means of letting off steam.

The unions, including the NSWTF, have enforced the cost-cutting agendas of governments for decades. They called off the teachers’ boycott of the federal Labor government’s NAPLAN testing regime in 2010, and entered into negotiations with the state Liberal-National government to police the LSLD measures in 2012. They were cheerleaders for the pro-business Gonski agenda, which poured funds into wealthy private schools, and worked closely with the education department on the “School Success Model.”

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) urges teachers to learn the lessons of these betrayals, and establish their own independent rank-and-file committees. Their task would be to coordinate an industrial and political campaign aimed at ensuring adequate staffing, well-paid, full-time jobs and decent conditions for students and staff.

Above all, the ongoing assault on public schools underscores the need for a new, socialist perspective that rejects the subordination of education, and every other social need, to the profit demands of big business. The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), which fights for this perspective, can be contacted at:

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