

Australia: NSW teachers to hold one-day strike on December 7

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Public school teachers in New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, will strike for 24 hours on December 7 to demand improved pay and conditions, the first such strike action in ten years.

The state's 50,000 public school teachers would have first read of the decision to strike on the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* last Saturday. The NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) executive chose to bypass the established practice of holding stop-work meetings with rank-and-file teachers to allow them to debate and vote on the strike action. Instead, in a highly orchestrated state council meeting the recommendation to strike was passed without questions or debate by councillors wearing campaign t-shirts, with discussion over the strike recommendation replaced by chants and photo ops.

Teachers from the greater Sydney area, Newcastle and the Central Coast, the Southern Highlands and the Blue Mountains were directed to rally outside Parliament House on the day of the stoppage, with teachers in the regions across the state to gather at designated centres.

The strike reflects widespread anger among teachers over ever-greater workloads, stagnant pay amid a soaring cost of living, and the endangerment of their safety with a profit-driven reopening of the schools amid COVID transmission. The NSWTF prevented any discussion among members about the action, for fear that there would be calls for wider action, and condemnations of its role in herding teachers and students into unsafe classrooms.

The union has sought to narrowly focus the stoppage on its negotiations for a new enterprise agreement, with the previous deal expiring at the end of the year.

Despite the limited character of the action, however, the state Liberal-National government has sought to ban it. An application for the stoppage to be outlawed was upheld by the pro-business Industrial Relations Commission yesterday, while state Education Minister Sarah Mitchell contemptuously accused teachers of "abandoning" students with the one-day walk-out.

Both the government and the union are fearful of explosive

anger among teachers over soaring workloads, endless policy changes and wholly inadequate resourcing to address the complex challenges facing students in the state's public schools.

This has resulted in teachers leaving the profession in droves. Indicators of the crisis are a thirty percent decline in initial teacher education over the past five years, while the rate for student teachers completing their education courses has plummeted by fifty percent. According to a union survey, unsustainable workloads were the reason for two-thirds of survey respondents reconsidering their positions as teachers.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 has exacerbated the situation teachers confront. Almost overnight, they were tasked with providing remote learning without additional training or funding. Then, in order to be able to force parents back to workplaces and maximise corporate profits, governments ordered a rushed return to face-to-face teaching without regard for health and safety. In schools, the always inadequate mitigation measures, put in place mainly to create the illusion of safety, are being dismantled resulting in the state recording 500 school closures since October. Education is now by far the worst COVID-hit industry, significantly ahead of the aged care and health care sectors.

The salaries and conditions agreement and the rushed reopening of the schools in pandemic conditions are interconnected issues and should be dealt with together in a unified industrial and political campaign of educators.

The NSWTF executive's main concern is to block the emergence of such a movement. From the outset of the pandemic, the NSWTF has washed its hands of any responsibility for the safety of teachers and has worked in lockstep with the government, parroting their every official pronouncement. At the few sanctioned venues that are available for teachers to express concerns for their safety, the union has censored discussion.

At the Saturday council meeting, two motions sent to the council from the union's associations which raised concerns

about COVID mitigation measures were stymied by the NSWTF executive and not debated on the floor of the meeting. The union's contempt for the wellbeing of ordinary teachers was expressed in NSWTF president Angelo Gavrielatos's description of the reopening as "necessary, but not without its challenges."

The NSWTF determination to prevent any discussion about the dangers of COVID in schools must serve as a warning to teachers. The primary aim of the strike, far from serving as a measure to fight the regressive agenda being imposed on public schools, is to let off steam, dissipate the anger of teachers and give the union time to stitch-up another rotten deal with the government.

The record shows that union-employer award negotiations, far from improving working conditions, have served as mechanisms for either trading off working conditions that teachers have won in the past or imposing new attacks in exchange for near zero real salary rises.

In the 2000 award, at the insistence of the Carr state Labor government that teachers working conditions become "flexible" to allow public schools to compete in an education "marketplace," the category of "temporary" teachers was signed off on by the NSWTF. Two decades on, 40 percent of teachers work in insecure employment.

A 2012–16 award ushered in the school devolution model, Local Schools, Local Decisions (LSLD), an offshoot of federal Labor's "self-managed" schools' agenda. It gave principals more powers over staffing and streamlined "unsatisfactory performance" mechanisms to allow targeted teachers to be sacked in as little as 13 weeks. The union called a 24-hour strike attended by the largest number of teachers since the 1980s. It then worked to bolster principals' powers, backing, without any consultation with the membership, the 2016 staffing agreement which expanded principals' powers to hire teachers.

That deal, which teachers were given no opportunity to read prior to voting, left thousands of teachers \$40,000 out of pocket as the long-standing incremental pay scale, under which teachers were paid according to their years of experience, was replaced with "standards-based" pay. This was a step towards making teachers' pay dependent on their students' test results.

LSLD was followed this year by the "School Success" model. The union dismissed the model as "spin without substance" and has mounted no opposition to its toxic measures. These include annual improvement targets, with "underperforming" schools facing automatic departmental intervention and tying teacher performance to how much "value" they add to student "learning progressions" (see: "School Success Model spearheads deeper offensive against Australian public schools").

The NSWTF campaign to "reset" teachers working conditions has been little more than political posturing. Its main demands, for a 5 percent pay rise annually with an extra 2.5 for senior positions, and 2 hours a week to deal with workload, challenge none of the underlying problems public schools face: the bi-partisan degrading of public education to a residual safety-net through underfunding, privatisation, and the scapegoating of teachers.

It can be safely predicted that none of the union's limited log of claims will be included in the final agreement signed off on by the NSWTF and the state government.

The campaign has consisted of sanctioned 20-minute walkouts, timed to cause the minimum disruption to the school day.

The NSWTF recently launched its "More than Thanks" advertising campaign, focused on demands for a pay rise, with teachers directed to write a letter to Dominic Perrottet, the state premier. Perrottet, as state treasurer, last year cut the public sector wage cap, which covers teachers' salaries, even further. For a decade the wage cap had been frozen at 2.5 percent. Perrottet demanded it be reduced to 1.5 per cent, which he defended as a "generous policy."

The bankrupt appeals to Perrottet demonstrate that the union is preparing another sell-out.

The fight for decent wages and conditions must be taken out of the hands of the union bureaucracy and joined with a struggle to protect the health and safety of staff and students by forcing the closure of the schools amid COVID transmission.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) has fought from the outset of the pandemic for the formation of rank-and-file safety committees independent of the unions, in every school.

The starting point for a new agreement must not be what the government and union deem "affordable" but rather what is necessary to deliver decent working conditions for teachers and school staff and high quality, safe educational facilities for all public school students.

The CFPE will provide every assistance to those seeking to take forward this struggle. Contact us today and get involved!

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