

# Australia: NSW teachers hold first strike in ten years

**Our reporters**  
**7 December 2021**

Public school teachers in New South Wales (NSW) went on strike yesterday—their first statewide walkout in 10 years. The stoppage, involving 50,000 staff, expressed immense anger over the intolerable conditions which have resulted in nine out of ten teachers considering leaving the profession.

In a sign of growing militancy and the potential strength of the working class the teachers defied a ruling by the pro-business NSW Industrial Relations Commission, which ordered the strike to be cancelled, as well as government threats and denunciations.

Teachers are compelled to carry out hours of unpaid labour every week. With both Labor and Liberal-National governments having refused to invest in the sector, a growing number of schools are erecting demountable buildings to cope with increased enrollments.

The intolerable conditions have already resulted in a mass exodus. This has intensified the workloads of those who remain. Such is the crisis that at some schools dozens of classes a week are unsupervised because there is no teacher available.

The NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) is directly responsible for these conditions, which are the results of one sell-out industrial agreement after another. The union only called the stoppage, having suppressed any action for a decade, for fear of a rebellion among its members if it did not.

The NSWTF's demands in current negotiations for a new agreement would do nothing to resolve the crisis that the union has helped create. It is calling only for marginal pay improvements and two hours a week set aside for non-teaching activities.

Some 5,000 teachers took part in a rally outside NSW state parliament in Sydney. Hundreds more gathered at rallies and meetings in regional centres.

In Sydney, NSWTF president Angelo Gavrielatos outlined some of the dire conditions teachers confront. He was unable to explain how they had come to pass, and did not offer any perspective as to how they could be fought.

Gavrielatos did not refer to the previous agreements struck by the unions, or outline any future action. His speech was peppered with vague demagoguery. He told the assembled teachers that “we hear your pain” and “we will be back,” but did not indicate when or what form this unspecified action would take.

In practice, the union's campaign for a new agreement has largely centred on pleas to the state Liberal-National government of Premier Dominic Perrottet for minimal concessions. Teachers have been directed by the union to wear shirts and carry placards

declaring that they “deserve more than thanks.” This moral appeal to the government is falling on deaf ears.

The elephant in the room was the COVID crisis. Not a single union speaker mentioned the pandemic. This was hardly an accident. In October, the NSWTF, like its counterparts in Victoria, helped the government herd teachers back into the classrooms packed with mostly-unvaccinated children. The consequences have been disastrous already, with more than 500 school outbreaks in NSW in the two months since.

The union's role in the pandemic exposes it as an arm of government and big business. The sole purpose of the return to school is to facilitate the pro-business “reopening of the economy” by creating the conditions for parents to be forced back to their places of employment.

The NSWTF has not even mentioned the potentially vaccine-resistant Omicron variant, which appears to be particularly dangerous to children and is now circulating in Sydney schools.

Unions NSW secretary Mark Morey spoke for roughly a minute. “Today is the start of industrial campaigning across this state to ensure everyone is paid appropriately, our kids are looked after and the services are provided,” Morey proclaimed.

This is a stump-speech he has delivered at a series of disputes over the past year, each of which has then been sold out by the union involved. Morey said nothing about what the supposed industrial campaign would entail.

Significantly, the teachers' strike occurred the same day as walkouts by thousands of bus and train drivers in Sydney. The unions are seeking to keep the disputes separate and confine them within the framework of industrial bargaining, which has been used to enforce sell-outs over the past three decades and to suppress the class struggle.

Socialist Equality Party campaigners intervened at the Sydney rally, distributing a statement by the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) entitled: “Omicron outbreak in Sydney school as Australian governments reject safety measures.”

The bankrupt character of the rally, which did not outline any way forward for teachers, demonstrates the correctness of the CFPE statement. It called for NSW teachers to unite with their colleagues in Victoria and across the country who confront identical issues. The CFPE indicted the unions for forcing teachers into classrooms that function as petri dishes for the virus, and insisted on the need for a fight to shut the schools while COVID is circulating in the community.

This, the CFPE explained, must be the focal point for a broader political and industrial struggle against the intolerable conditions that have been imposed by the NSWTF and its counterparts. Such a fight can go forward only through a rebellion against the unions and the establishment of an interconnected network of rank-and-file committees at all schools. These would enable teachers to democratically discuss and decide upon their demands, free from the censorship of the union bureaucrats, to share information, including on the spread of COVID in the schools, and to plan action, including strikes, aimed at reversing the dire conditions.

The CFPE is holding an online meeting on Saturday, at 2pm (ADST), to discuss this perspective and the experiences of teachers. Register for the event, entitled “COVID-19 spreads through Australian schools: Lives before profit! Stop the pandemic!” here: [https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN\\_9W5mwc1kSoSEQ0Sv1R7ZDA](https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_9W5mwc1kSoSEQ0Sv1R7ZDA).

SEP campaigners spoke to teachers at the Sydney rally.

**Veronica**, a primary school teacher, has been on temporary contracts for ten years despite wanting a permanent position. “The workload is just insane and it’s getting worse and worse every year,” she said. “It’s not just about the pay, it’s about the workload.”

Asked about the pandemic, Veronica said the school “reopening happened too soon. It was all rushed. There was no respect for what we did during COVID. I was working 12-14 hour days during COVID.”

Speaking of the Labor and Liberal parties, she said: “I think they are all the same. They say one thing to get into parliament. Once they are in power they forget about all their promises. It’s just empty promises. I think there will be more strikes and more teachers leaving the profession unless something is done, something happens.”

**Matt**, a primary school teacher for five years, added: “The rate of pay has been declining. Many teachers, including myself, are considering leaving the profession due to the conditions. This is my first time striking. I would like to believe in collective action. The proof will be in the pudding.”

**Vicky**, a high school history teacher and head of student welfare, said: “I’ve been a teacher since 1980 and in 1981 we had to strike for four days to get a decent living wage.” Commenting on the state government’s 2.5 percent wage rise cap for public sector workers, she said: “Other workers are hoping we are going to lead the way and we certainly hope to do so for all the other public sector employees. We have a situation where nurses can’t afford to live near the hospitals they’re working at. Teachers are having to work two jobs to survive in Sydney.”

A high school engineering teacher, who had spent seven years as a casual and temporary teacher before getting a permanent position, said: “We can’t get teachers, and that is exhausting.” The workload was so intense she was “falling apart trying to keep up.”

When asked who was responsible, she stated: “This is ongoing. This is not just the Liberal-National Coalition in New South Wales. This is all governments across Australia. I don’t think Labor has done any favours for the education system. I think they are better, but I don’t think that they are good.”

“Even with Labor in, they still did not address the inequity between private funding and public funding. Private schools should be self-funding. It is ridiculous that we can’t get working toilets and the [private] school down the road is after a rifle range.”

**Phil**, a retired teacher with 44 years in primary schools, including 22 years as a principal, said: “I am here to protest to the government until they get the message that we need to look at the conditions of primary school teachers and teachers in general, and the pay. We need to be able to attract and retain our teachers and we cannot at present with what we’ve got.”

“The vacancies are incredible. It is right through the whole state. We cannot get teachers to come in and commit because they can go somewhere else and get better pay, better conditions, where they don’t have those 55 hours plus a week that we have to do.”

“In primary schools we do not have the admin staff to help us. It relies on people who have a full-time teaching load, so it’s really difficult. You need time away from teaching face-to-face, you need preparation time, you need planning time, you need collaboration time.”

**Michael**, a mathematics and physical education teacher, said: “The administration and government say that they are concerned about the wellbeing of the kids. Well how about we get more school counsellors, more child psychologists and more teachers’ aides? We’ve only had one at our school over the last 12 months and it hasn’t been enough.”

On the dangers of the pandemic, Michael said: “If the science says we need air filters in the classrooms, we need those filters, we need those measures. Parents don’t want their children going into an unsafe environment, teachers don’t want to be going into an unsafe environment, that’s incredibly irresponsible. If you have a pandemic going on at the moment, with new infectious strains coming out, the way the federal government has treated it is raising more questions than answers.”

“I don’t know why they have proceeded with the full reopenings. I think it has just been to get people back into work and kids back to schools for child-minding. We can’t properly teach. Like, what’s the rush? Safety has to come first. People have had enough, that’s why I am here today at the strike.”



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