

Australia: NSW teachers to strike against unbearable working conditions, real pay cuts

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Public school teachers in New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, are striking for 24 hours next Wednesday, May 4, in opposition to chronic understaffing, unbearable workloads and the attempts of the state Liberal-National government to impose a pay "increase" far below rapidly rising inflation.

The stoppage is shining a spotlight on a breakdown caused by decades of government funding cuts, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which amounts to an existential crisis of the public education sector. The situation is so bad that some 10,000 NSW teachers left the profession last year.

The strike was only called by the NSW Teachers' Federation (NSWTF) last week, for fear that anger and opposition would escape the union's control. In the course of protracted bargaining for a new industrial agreement with the government, the NSWTF has limited action to a single one-day strike in December, together with localised and time-limited walkouts at individual schools.

In Term One, the union promised the government that it would not hold any strikes, in a sign of "good faith" during bargaining. The NSWTF has since claimed that it has not held formal negotiations with the government over the new agreement since last October. The government is continuing to insist that the deal include an annual pay cap of just over 2 percent, under conditions where inflation is already at 5.1 percent, and that it will not contain a single measure to address understaffing or workload issues.

The government has initiated arbitration in the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC), beginning May 9, with the state's pro-business tribunal likely to rubber-stamp the attacks on teachers contained in the agreement.

In other words, for some four months, since the strike in December, the NSWTF has prevented any struggle against the government's proposed agreement. Over the same period, the union enforced the return to face-to-face teaching, which resulted in tens of thousands of teacher and student infections in Term One. Now that an IRC enforced settlement is imminent, the NSWTF executive has called the one-day strike, to cover its own record in facilitating the government's imposition of the agreement.

It is clear that the union is sitting on a powder keg of

opposition. Prior to calling the stoppage, the NSWTF polled 10,000 members on their pay and conditions. Some 73 percent said their workload is unmanageable; 70 percent are reconsidering whether or not to remain in the profession; 90 percent disagreed that their pay reflects their expertise and responsibilities; 89 percent said staff shortages were very significant, and 82 percent said that these were resulting in higher workloads at their school.

In addition to the strike, the NSWTF has authorised its members to walkout of schools if any member of the government attends them. Dozens of teachers availed themselves of that opportunity at Meadowbank Public School and Marsden High School in northwest Sydney when it was visited by Premier Dominic Perrottet and his education minister, Sarah Mitchell, on Wednesday. This follows previous walkouts at individual schools over recent months, including at Penrith in working-class western Sydney, and in a number of regional areas.

Teachers and parents have also spoken out on the conditions they confront. In an article by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation earlier this month, it was revealed that at Dubbo College Delroy Campus in northwest NSW, 1,400 class periods were impacted by teacher shortages in Term One alone.

One parent stated that only two of her son's 18 classes in the prior week had proceeded as scheduled. The school's union workplace committee reported Year 10 students were not learning the necessary skills for years 11 and 12; class cancellations meant large numbers of children were being grouped together on an oval for supervision by several teachers; and an average of 15 staff members were absent on any given day, with reasons including burnouts.

The *Guardian* reported in January, prior to the massive COVID surge in schools, that 70 public schools had staff vacancy rates of 20 percent or higher, with 3,300 vacant positions across the state as of the end of last year. It cited briefings by the NSW government, revealing that some 40,000 students were taught last year by "out of field" teachers without direct qualifications for the subject matter, with the number slated to rise to one in eight students in 2022.

While the government is seeking to paper over the shortages by hiring fast-tracked university students, with limited

experience and qualifications, research by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership found that one in three teachers under 30 intended to leave the profession over the coming decade, along with 40 percent of educators aged 30–39.

Many who are quitting the profession cite workload as the reason. The EduResearch Matters group found last year that on average, public school teachers were working 55 hours per week. This meant that they were consistently forced to work 11 to 12 hours per week more than their paid hours.

Teachers are also faced with the consequences of an infrastructure crisis, caused by decades of funding cuts by Labor and Liberal-National governments alike. There are more than 5,500 “temporary” classrooms across the state. In reality, at many schools demountable sheds are a semi-permanent feature. In some working-class schools, there are between 18 and 40 demountables, accounting for a substantial proportion of classrooms. They often lack basic amenities, including air conditioning, and teaching facilities.

Demand is outpacing supply, with more children in the state’s public school sector than available places. The government response is to boost enrolment numbers, creating large class sizes and overcrowded schools. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported in February, for instance, “Castle Hill High and Riverbank Public schools are both expected to hit more than 2,000 students in 2022, despite having enough permanent classrooms for fewer than 900 students.”

The government has also overseen a series of mergers, creating “super-schools” with thousands of students. Teachers have stated that in such schools, it is impossible to provide the often working-class pupils with the care and educational assistance that they require.

In a submission to a planned inquiry into school infrastructure, reported by the *Guardian*, a number of western Sydney councils warned that the public school crisis was forcing parents to send their children to private schools. The *Guardian* stated that previous research found nine out of the ten most overcrowded schools in the state are in Sydney’s working-class west.

The richest private schools are the recipients of vast sums of government funding, on top of the exorbitant fees they charge parents, and have infrastructure and facilities that could not be dreamed of at a public school. At the same time, conditions for teachers in the independent school sector frequently mirror those of their public counterparts, prompting Catholic school educators to threaten to join Wednesday’s strike.

The NSWTF’s demands, even if they were met, would do nothing to resolve this crisis. For more than a decade, the union has enforced an effective wage freeze for public school teachers, by accepting that state government’s public sector pay cap of 2 or 2.5 percent per annum.

Now, it is calling for an annual wage increase of 5 to 7.5 percent. The low range of the demand is already beneath

official inflation and would not compensate for the already lost wages. The cost of living has increased far more sharply than the official figures, however, meaning the pay request would not boost real wages. Electricity prices alone are tipped to rise by 20 percent in 2022, and by a similar proportion over the next several years.

The union’s request for two extra hours of allocated planning time a week is also the equivalent of a band-aid on a gaping wound. Figures that the NSWTF itself regularly cites show that teachers are doing far more hours of unpaid labour a week than a couple of hours.

The conditions in the schools, moreover, are the direct responsibility of the union. For decades, it has collaborated with state governments, while they have slashed funding, while striking one industrial agreement after another entrenching the intolerable conditions and suppressing wages.

The role of the teacher unions is exemplified in Victoria, where the Australian Education Union is seeking to impose a deal that would restrict pay rises to beneath two percent per annum while doing nothing to address workloads or staff shortages. The NSWTF is undoubtedly preparing to do the same, and will seek to enforce whatever demands the IRC imposes in arbitration.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) is fighting for a genuine industrial and political struggle against the assault on teachers’ pay and conditions. It calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, which function as a police force of governments.

These would unify teachers across the country and internationally, rally support from parents and other sections of the working class, and wage a political fight against the Labor and Liberal-National governments seeking to slash pay and impose the burden of their state debts on teachers and other public sector workers.

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