

# Australia: NSW teachers' strike—form rank and file committees, prepare political struggle against government!

**Committee For Public Education**  
**2 May 2022**

The strike tomorrow by tens of thousands of public school teachers and staff across New South Wales (NSW) is a powerful expression of widespread opposition to an onslaught against wages and conditions and the degradation of public education.

The situation confronting education workers—unbearable workloads, chronic staff shortages and the daily threat of COVID infection—is a concentrated expression of what increasingly faces the entire working class. Among health workers, aged care staff and broader sections, there is a mood of opposition and a desire to fight back.

Amid a federal election, these oppositional sentiments do not find the slightest expression in the campaigns of the major parties or the establishment media.

The New South Wales Teachers' Federation (NSWTF), which reluctantly called the stoppage in response to explosive anger among rank-and-file teachers, claims that a Labor government would be a “lesser evil” and may even address the education crisis. This is a complete fraud.

All of the parliamentary parties, Labor, the Liberal-Nationals and the Greens, support an extension and deepening of the policies that have led to the catastrophe in public education. They are united behind the “let it rip” COVID program and further sweeping cuts to education, healthcare and other key areas of social spending, to force the working class to pay for the hundreds of billions provided to big business throughout the pandemic.

To the extent that federal Labor leader Anthony Albanese has differentiated Labor from the Liberal-Nationals, it has been from the right. Albanese has pitched Labor to big business as better placed to enforce “herd immunity” and impose sweeping pro-business restructuring. In other words, whichever party forms government, it will step up the offensive against teachers and all other workers.

This is demonstrated by the experiences of the past six months. Public school teachers and students, in NSW and across the country, were sent back into overcrowded classrooms as the Omicron variant surged. The reopening, aimed at forcing parents back to work to ensure corporate profits, was spearheaded by Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews, his NSW counterpart Dominic Perrottet and Prime Minister Scott Morrison, with the full support of Albanese.

What has been the consequence? Tens or even hundreds of

thousands of infections, untold illness and at least one teacher death. The “let it rip” COVID policies have brought the long-developing crisis in public schools, resulting from decades of Labor and Liberal cuts, to the point of breakdown.

At many schools, the staff shortages are so severe that hundreds of classes went uncovered in Term One. Teachers are hit with a dozen or more hours of unpaid overtime a week. And the continuous cycle of infections and reinfections has made the situation completely unworkable, in addition to posing the constant threat of grave illness.

Even before the Omicron surge, there were 3,300 teacher vacancies across NSW. Hundreds of schools confront an infrastructure crisis, with student overcrowding and the widespread use of demountables (temporary lightweight structures) as classrooms. Meanwhile, the wealthiest private schools continue to receive mountains of government funding, as they sit on resources that could not be dreamt of in underfunded public institutions.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) warns that the NSWTF has no answers for this crisis. In fact, the union bears primary responsibility. It supported the dangerous school reopening and has enforced it every step of the way.

The union, functioning as an industrial police force of government, has imposed one sell-out industrial agreement after another, suppressing wages and entrenching the intolerable conditions that exist.

In the current dispute, the union has sought to tie teachers' hands behind their backs as the NSW government goes on a frontal assault. In Term One, the NSWTF imposed a “no strike” pledge as a sign of “good faith” to the government. This has allowed the government to press ahead with its plans for cuts to wages and conditions and to take the case to the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) for arbitration.

The union will support whatever the IRC demands, in line with its support for the entire framework of pro-business industrial tribunals and courts. Its own demands, for a pay rise between 5 and 7.5 percent and two hours more preparation time a week, would not change the situation confronting teachers one iota.

Official inflation is already running at 5.1 percent, but for essential items it is far higher and it will only increase. This means the NSWTF pay demand, even if granted in full, will in a very

short time amount to a wage cut. The two hours planning it requests from the government would not touch the sides of the unpaid overtime teachers are forced to perform every single week.

The CFPE is calling on teachers and school staff to strike out on a new road. It supports the socialist program of action advanced by the Socialist Equality Party in the federal election, aimed at mobilising workers in a fight for their social and democratic rights against all of the pro-business parties, including Labor.

The CFPE advocates the formation of rank-and-file committees, at all schools, completely independent of the unions. This is the only means of developing the broadest democratic discussion among teachers and organising a genuine industrial and political fight against the proposed agreement and the broader assault on conditions, including the dangerous COVID policies.

NSW teachers should turn to their colleagues, across Australia and internationally, who face identical issues, want to fight and are increasingly raising the need for unified action.

In Victoria, tens of thousands of teachers have registered their opposition to a regressive industrial agreement, cooked up by the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the Andrews Labor government, which would slash wages without addressing workloads or any other conditions. In South Australia, the AEU sabotaged a two-thirds vote for strike action against the dangerous school reopening, having enforced a similar sell-out industrial deal.

The developing struggles of teachers are part of a broader re-emergence of the class struggle, reflected in strikes by NSW nurses and other health workers this year, planned action by aged care staff in several states and seething opposition to the political establishment. All of these struggles pose the need to break the straitjacket of the unions, which isolate them and seek to create the conditions to sell them out.

Teacher rank-and-file committees could make a powerful appeal to health workers and other sections throughout the public sector and more broadly for unified action and a united political struggle.

The CFPE proposes the following demands as the basis for a fight by rank-and-file committees against the NSW agreement:

- An immediate across-the-board 30 percent pay increase to compensate for previous inadequate wage deals. Salaries fully indexed against inflation, with automatic monthly cost of living adjustments to ensure no educator is worse off in the future.
- Hire thousands of teachers and education support staff to end the current punishing workloads. Re-employ the large number of experienced educators driven out of the profession in the last period.
- Maximum class sizes of 18-20. End the burden of administrative tasks, so that teachers can focus on teaching. Adequate time within school hours for planning, assessment and collaboration with colleagues. Abolish NAPLAN and other regressive standardised testing measures that are aimed at legitimising funding cuts for “underperforming” schools and increasing teacher workloads.
- Implement the necessary public health care measures to combat COVID-19 in the schools, including mask wearing, social distancing and ventilation. End the cover-up of infections—teachers, students, and parents have the right to know about

infections and clusters. Shift to properly-resourced remote learning while community infections are taking place. Teachers and school workers infected or forced to self-isolate must receive full income support, with no loss of accrued leave entitlements.

- Fully-funded, properly staffed, and high-quality support services for all students, including those with disabilities and those affected by the pandemic.

- Initiate an urgent, high quality school construction program in working class communities. Halt the privatisation of Australia’s school system! No more public funds for elite private schools, expropriate and redistribute the vast public cash previously provided to these institutions! Pour tens of billions of dollars into public education to reverse decades of under-funding and provide free, high-quality education to every child.

The CFPE rejects the claims of governments, unions, the media and all those who defend capitalism that there is “no money.” There are resources, which are all produced by the working class, but they are in the hands of the corporate and financial elite. We call for the nationalisation of the banks, mining companies and major corporations under democratic workers’ control so as to meet the pressing social needs of the majority, not the profits of the wealthy few.

The SEP, which initiated the CFPE, fights to unify the working class in political struggle for a workers’ government to refashion society along socialist lines. We urge teachers to support the SEP and its candidates in the current federal election (see: “A socialist program of action for the working class to oppose war and fight COVID-19 and austerity”). The SEP and CFPE offer every assistance to teachers to establish rank-and-file committees and to take forward this political struggle. We encourage you to contact us and to join our ranks.

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To contact the WSWs and the  
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