Australia: Tens of thousands of NSW teachers strike against intolerable conditions, pay cuts

Oscar Grenfell, SEP Senate candidate for NSW
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A strike by tens of thousands of public school teachers across New South Wales (NSW), the country's most populous state, gave powerful expression to an emerging movement of the working class involving nurses, health staff, aged care workers and a number of other sections.

As many as 20,000 of the strikers gathered in the centre of Sydney, marching to the NSW state parliament. Events were held across the state, including in regional and rural areas, where the broader issues of chronic understaffing and unbearable workloads long ago reached crisis proportions.

Contingents from entire schools traveled together to the Sydney rally, some with banners featuring their school name. The working-class western and south-western suburbs of Sydney, which have been hardest hit by the COVID surge and the decades-long underfunding of public education, were well represented.

Teachers carried homemade banners. One teacher wrote that she had been compelled to do 20 hours unpaid overtime at home before even stepping foot in the classroom. Another noted that when teachers were off sick, there were no casuals to fill their classes. Many condemned NSW Liberal Premier Dominic Perrottet as a representative of the rich, attacking the pay and conditions of teachers while governing in the interests of big business.

As they were marching to the state parliament, teachers chanted slogans denouncing the government and demanding immediate measures to increase staffing and to ensure decent pay. Amid an official inflation rate of 5.1 percent and a skyrocketing cost of living, the government is pushing an industrial agreement that would lock in pay "raises" of 2.5 percent and do nothing to address the breakdown of the sector.

The mood of militancy was palpable. Many teachers told Socialist Equality Party campaigners they were pleased that finally some action had been called and they were on the streets voicing their demands.

Teachers in the state last struck in December, over the same industrial agreement, their first statewide 24-hour stoppage in a decade. Then, in Term One of 2022, the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) imposed a strike ban, in a sign of "good faith" to the government that is attacking the teachers the union claims to represent. This was never discussed in the union membership, let alone endorsed.

As it shut down industrial action, the NSWTF imposed the face-to-face reopening of schools, as the Omicron variant of COVID surged. This resulted in tens of thousands of school infections of students and teachers, an untold number of serious illnesses and at least one teacher's death.

The union only called yesterday's strike out of fear that the explosive anger building up among teachers would escape its control. Teachers have, over the past week, refused to stay on site if NSW government MPs visit their school. This has resulted in numbers of walkouts by educators, including when NSW Premier Perrottet and his education minister attempted to visit a school in Sydney.

The holding of the stoppage was also an attempt to cover the union's role in allowing the government attacks to escalate. Perrottet responded to the "good faith" suppression of teachers action by beginning arbitration on the agreement in the Industrial Relations Tribunal, which is set to hear the matter this month. The union was anxious to put up some show of opposition, before it seeks to enforce whatever cuts the tribunal mandates.

The rally was organised in line with these cynical, unstated aims of a union which functions as an industrial police force of governments and the education department.

Several teachers and school principals spoke from the platform on the crisis in the sector. They described a system in collapse: Classes going unfilled because there are not enough teachers, subjects cut for the same reason, all intensified by COVID. Their colleagues were working a dozen or more hours overtime a week and were still behind, their schools did not have enough resources and the whole situation had become unworkable.

NSWTF President Angelo Gavrielatos made similar points, highlighting the more than 3,000 teacher vacancies across the state and the ever-growing demands on educators. But he did not say a word about how this had come to pass, other than to gesture at the state parliament in reference to the Perrottet government.

In reality, the union has signed one sell-out industrial agreement after another, enforcing the state pay cap, mandating wage rises of 2.5 percent, and ensuring that conditions deteriorate. Over the same period, the union has suppressed any action by teachers, ensuring that there have only been three strikes in a decade, including Wednesday's stoppage.

Gavrielatos, who was maskless throughout the event, did not mention the "let it rip" COVID policies, including the dangerous mass reopening of the schools. That is because he and the union supported and enforced this program, which subordinates the health and lives of teachers and children to the drive by big

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business to force parents back into their workplaces.

Notably, Gavrielatos did not mention the Labor Party, though the union maintains close ties with it and has promoted it for decades. The silence was no doubt in part motivated by the fact that Labor is widely reviled as a corrupt instrument of the banks and big business. This week, the NSW state Labor opposition sided with the Perrottet government, voting down a motion for mandated nurse-to-patient ratios, one of the key demands of health workers.

The teachers' strike, moreover, occurred during a federal election in which Labor leader Anthony Albanese is seeking to outflank Liberal-National Prime Minister Scott Morrison from the right. Albanese is pitching Labor to the corporate elite as a better vehicle for the imposition of sweeping austerity measures and pro-business restructuring.

Gavrielatos and the union nevertheless presented the crisis in the schools as the result of Perrottet's right-wing proclivities, implicitly promoting the fraud that Labor is a lesser-evil. At the rally in Newcastle, a regional city north of Sydney, the attempt to pump up Labor was more explicit. The local Labor lord mayor was among the featured speakers.

At the same time, Gavrielatos' pitch was for the government to come to the bargaining table with the union. "We are ready to negotiate," he declared, complaining that Perrottet had rejected talks with the union since late last year. The union is calling for pay rises of just 5.1 to 7 percent per annum, barely in line with the current inflation rate, and two hours extra preparation time for teachers who are working a dozen or more hours overtime already.

In other words, the union is appealing to the government for collaboration in working out and enforcing a sell-out agreement that would resolve nothing for teachers. Gavrielatos did not outline a single further action that the union would take.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) intervened at the rally to provide teachers with an alternative perspective. SEP campaigners distributed hundreds of copies of the party's election statement, as well as the appeal addressed to striking teachers by the Committee for Public Education.

Gavrielatos angrily dismissed SEP candidate for the NSW Senate Max Boddy when he asked to address the rally. Boddy, however, spoke to gathered teachers on a loudhailer. Boddy stated:

"The Socialist Equality Party fully supports today's strike. This is a powerful expression of the opposition that is building up across the working class. The situation facing teachers—unbearable workloads, pay cuts, and the daily risk of COVID infection—increasingly confronts all sections of workers.

"The key issue is how this struggle can be taken forward. Firstly, we are fighting for the unity of teachers across the country and internationally. Many teachers in Victoria, South Australia and other states, are asking why they're not out on strike with you today. And the question could be broadened. This year alone, we've seen strikes in NSW by nurses, health workers, there are planned stoppages by aged care workers, rail workers are in a dispute. If all of these struggles were brought together in unified action, that would be a powerful movement.

"And secondly, nothing is going to be solved by the election. Labor, the Liberals and the Greens all support the policies that have created a disaster in public education. They are united behind the profit-driven 'let it rip' COVID program that has led to mass infections. And they all support budget cuts, to make the working class pay for the hundreds of billions given to big business during the pandemic."

Boddy pointed to the role of the NSWTF in isolating teachers and suppressing their struggles. He said that the situation in Victoria was a warning. In that state, the Australian Education Union and the Labor government are seeking to impose a sell-out industrial agreement that would limit annual wage rises to below 2 percent, while locking-in soaring workloads.

The alternative, the SEP candidate said, was for teachers to take matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions. These could unite teachers across the country and internationally, together with other workers, such as the nurses. Boddy outlined demands proposed by the SEP, including for a 30 percent immediate wage rise, an end to unpaid overtime, and the hiring of tens of thousands of new teachers with decent pay and conditions.

Such demands, he explained, needed to be fought for, in a political struggle against Labor, the Liberal-Nationals, the corporatised unions and the capitalist profit system that they all defend.

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