

# Striking New South Wales teachers speak out over low wages and worsening conditions

WSWS reporters  
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Tens of thousands of public-school teachers walked out on strike for 24 hours yesterday and protested across New South Wales (NSW) to demand higher wages and improved conditions. It was the second state-wide teachers' strike in the past six months.

The stoppage highlighted the growing militancy of teachers, as well as other key sections of the working class such as nurses.

The unions, however, including the NSW Teachers Federation, which called yesterday's strike, are seeking to keep these struggles isolated, as they work to impose sell-out industrial and enterprise agreements that will do nothing to resolve the appalling conditions of educators.

Socialist Equality Party campaigners intervened at the Sydney and Newcastle protests of striking teachers, holding discussions with a number of participants.

**Michael**, a primary school teacher, joined the Sydney rally because of "the enormous workloads, not enough teachers in the industry and numerous other issues," he said.

"We've had to collapse numerous programs at my school like new arrival programs for migrant children. They come with limited English and need that additional support. When we've got teachers away, or they're sick, that's one of the first programs that is ended in order to staff the other classrooms. It's really disappointing that some of our most at-risk students are missing out on these educational needs.

"We look at the number of understaffed schools, they're in working-class areas and in the regional and rural areas. I've worked out there and we also need quality teachers in the regions. If we haven't got enough teachers in Sydney, which is typically a high-staffed area, I can only image how our out-of-town colleagues are going. They're doing it tough. There are schools where you have teachers doing subjects that they weren't trained for, where teachers are carrying the load of four classes because of shortages.

"COVID didn't start this, it just highlighted issues that have been there for a long time. When I started teaching, government officials would always say, 'We've got an oversupply of teachers.' But it was known that large numbers would be retiring over the following years. This had been clear for a decade or more and nothing was done.

"Pay is an issue, but I would say it's not isolated to teachers. With inflation rising at 5.1 percent, that's a federal issue too. We've got to look at wage growth. Nurses, teachers, transport workers, the NSW government has got to do something. At the moment pay is an issue, but above all it's about teachers burning out. Those who are already in the industry saying, after five or so years, 'Why bother, we're not appreciated, we don't feel like we're valued.'

"Data is an important part of the education system, but it's not everything. We're told we've got to do all this testing, but it's taking

away from the professional judgment of teachers, people who have studied to become a professional in the industry. All it does is put more work into marking tests and takes away from quality curriculum to teach students. With testing and COVID, the content that I actually teach the kids has been reduced by half."

**Dennis**, a teacher since 1985, said he was striking for "better working conditions, better conditions to give our kids the most we can. We need this so that all kids from disadvantaged areas, all the way up to kids born with a silver spoon in their mouth, get the same opportunities in life.

"There's more and more red tape, more irrelevant paperwork we have to fill out. I got into it because I love learning, kids and teaching, but now we have less and less time to focus on those areas. When I first began teaching, we had specialist subject coordinators who would come and help. Now the development of content is up to teachers at the coalface.

"The elephant in the room is public versus private school funding. We've never had equal funding. Lots of the people making these decisions are from the private schools themselves."

**Matt**, a Sydney primary school teacher for the past ten years, described some of the harsh conditions in the state's schools.

"I sit on my lounge every night with my computer and smart phone responding to emails. Last night when it got to quarter to eight, I turned to my partner and said, 'This is why I'm striking tomorrow. So, I don't have to do this every night,'" he explained.

"Although it's been like this for years, even before the pandemic, it's got absolutely worse this term because of the COVID crisis. I'm an executive, so I'm constantly trying to find casual teachers. There aren't any. They don't exist. Perhaps they're frightened to come in and I don't blame them. Many of our casual teachers are older people who are more vulnerable to infection.

"My day's work starts at 6 a.m. I do an hour's work before I leave home and at the end of the school day, I stay until after 5 p.m. I work through my lunchbreak and the time I'm given to prepare lessons, that is 'relief time.'

"Administrative and compliance work, not teaching, takes up the biggest part of my day. Kids need a lot of help, but I don't have the time to give them what they need. A lot of teachers are working out of their field. For example, my principal acts more like a business leader than an educator.

"I'm aware that teachers in Victoria are fighting over the same issues—pay, workload—so we should be uniting with them. I'm not at all surprised that 10,000 teachers quit teaching in NSW last year. I'm hopeful that we'll get our pay but I'm worried that it won't happen."

**Jill**, a primary school teacher, said, "I've been on a temp contract

for seven years. In a lot of industries, if you're on a temp contract for six months, you're made permanent. That's just not the case with this industry. There's no stability. No wonder there are no teachers.

"COVID has been really difficult," she continued. "It's impossible to do online learning with the kids in primary school. Now that the restrictions have been reduced, we're picking up the pieces and the workload has really increased. Every day we get kids who have tested positive for COVID, same with the teachers."

The reopening of schools is hard, Jill continued. "It's mandated that we get double vaccinated but not many of the children are. It's a brand-new virus and we don't know what the long-term effects are going to be. The government just wants to keep the economy going. The reopening is certainly not our decision. Teachers are treated like babysitters. We just look out for the kids while the parents go back to work.

"It's been a long time since we've been on strike. I know the union struck a deal ten years ago where we wouldn't strike. I absolutely don't agree with this. I feel like we've lost ten years and this has had a negative impact on the industry.

"The union didn't listen to us during those ten years. Many of my colleagues say the union hasn't done very much, they're fed up with the Federation and that's why they're not here today. I feel the same in many ways, but I am more optimistic.

"I absolutely believe there should be unity among workers. My mum's a nurse and COVID is an everyday issue for us at our workplaces. So far we've been lucky to have escaped unscathed," she said.

A teacher from the Hunter Valley, near Newcastle, who wanted to remain anonymous, said he was on strike because, "I am trying to find a solution to the problem. We have ridiculous workloads, we need a wage increase, it's just not cutting it with the rise in inflation at the moment, over 5 percent, it's just insane."

Commenting on the situation in schools, he said: "We can't do all the work that we are required to do at school and have to work late into the night at home to organise lesson plans. This happens every day. Even on weekends we must work to catch up.

"I've worked in my school for three years and I can't catch a break, I'm exhausted. It's mostly new teachers at our school who are working. Very few people have been here for a long time and it's hard. We're all really burnt out. We've only finished term one but it already feels like we've run a marathon and just ended term four.

"Students get really affected by this. If teaching is not a decent career or it becomes something that the teachers don't want to do, then it will really affect their students. You can't teach under these current conditions.

"There are real issues around COVID. We didn't get any support from the government or any instruction about online, remote teaching when the pandemic first started. But now, with the complete reopening of schools, the government's priority is to make sure things are running as 'normal' and create this idea that things are going fine.

"But this is not the case. In schools, classes are collapsing every day. At our school we have around 20 staff who are off almost every day and we can't get other teachers, casuals, to replace them.

"Class sizes are now ridiculous. We regularly have about 60 kids in the quadrangle that need supervision because there aren't enough teachers for classes and you have to combine them. No one is told about this. Instead, people are told that everything is going fine."

Another educator said, "Teachers have literally worked their asses off over the past few years. We're exhausted but all we get is a slap in

the face, with management saying we aren't going to pay you. They stopped pay rises around the time that COVID struck. Now we've got increasing mortgage payments, increased bills, rents and we can't live."

A special education teacher said, "We're inundated with paperwork, always working outside of teaching hours and unable to concentrate on the profession, on actually teaching the children.

"We've had an enormous increase in the number of split classes. This means that if you have a class without a teacher then the kids have to go into different classes to split up, they aren't getting their proper learning, or proper lessons. It has a really dire impact on the child's education.

"COVID has exacerbated this situation. I regularly have to take two classes at once. What's worst, often when I have a higher functioning class, they suffer because I have to focus on those kids who are lower functioning, who need more attention, so no one is getting the proper attention and education that they need.

"It's happening everywhere, in public schools, primary schools, high schools, and special-ed schools. And not just here in my region, but across the state, across the country, and in other countries for that matter, like in the UK and the USA.

"I've worked in this profession for 23 years and every year there is more and more expected of you. On top of that, our wages don't go up with inflation, so we are more and more slipping behind, and we are not getting the hours to do all of the work required. For example, I received an email yesterday saying that I now have to do two online courses on top of all the other mandatory courses that I have to do.

"And interest rates went up yesterday. Although I probably won't be hugely impacted, many who purchased a house in the past few years are over-committed. I hate to think what their situation is like now. It's going to be an absolute mess."

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