Australian Catholic school teachers and support staff hold first strike in 18 years

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Up to 18,000 Catholic school teachers and education support staff in New South Wales (NSW) and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) took strike action for the first time in 18 years on Friday.

Like their public school counterparts, who struck across NSW in December and early this month, teachers in the Catholic system face intolerable workloads, staff shortages exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and sub-inflationary pay "rise" offers from their employers.

The diocesan Catholic school system includes around 540 schools in NSW and the ACT. The Catholic Education Office oversees the functioning of the schools, which are largely in working-class areas. Unlike the elite independent schools associated with the Catholic church, which can cost more than $30,000 per year per student, the "systemic" schools charge around $1,360 per year per family in the primary sector and $2,500 per student in the secondary system.

Despite the massive wealth of the Catholic church, one of Australia's largest non-government property owners, the vast bulk of funding for Catholic schools comes from the government. Over the past decade, public spending on Catholic and other private schools has increased at almost five times the rate of public school funding. The slashing of public school funding has led to a decline in enrolments as parents increasingly see independent schools as the only way to provide their children with a decent education.

None of these vast and increasing resources are passed on to educators in the Catholic schools, who confront the same low and declining wages and constant overwork as those in the public sector.

Striking teachers gathered together in ten rallies across NSW and the ACT. The biggest turnout was in Sydney, where teachers marched from Sydney's Town Hall to the head office of the Catholic Archdiocese. In Newcastle, striking workers gathered in Wickham Park before marching to the Catholic Schools Office. Hundreds of teachers took part in other regional rallies.

The workers are seeking an increase in real wages, a lower teaching load to provide time to prepare lessons, a reduction in paperwork for teachers and pay parity with the public sector for support staff. They are also calling for employers to address chronic understaffing in schools.

Schools across the country are suffering as longstanding staff shortages intersect with a growing wave of COVID-19 and flu infections.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Rachel, a teacher at the Newcastle rally, who noted: "We have 6 to 15 teachers off sick every day and we only have about 3 or 4 casuals usually. In our contracts, you are meant to get 3 hours of extra [class teaching] per term, we are all way over that. That doesn't include the merged classes that we take."

She went on to say, "I spoke to a man at Taree who teaches. When his dad died, he could only take half a day off. There was no one to cover. They had kids sitting on the oval being minded."

These are precisely the issues behind recent strikes by NSW public school teachers. Despite this, the Independent Education Union (IEU), which covers private school educators, and the public sector New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) are doing everything in their power to isolate the workers.

The unions, acting as an industrial police force for management and government, are determined to prevent a unified struggle by teachers across both sectors. This is especially critical under conditions of mounting working-class unrest, particularly among other public sector employees including nurses and transport workers.

Public school teachers have had wage increases capped at 2.5 percent a year since 2011, in line with a NSW-wide cap on public sector wages first introduced by the Labor government in 2008 and subsequently enforced by unions in every industry. Although the Catholic employers are not bound by the cap set by the state government, they have already stated that they will not offer wage increases above those paid by the NSW and ACT governments.

In line with the NSWTF, the IEU is advancing a wage demand of just 10 to 15 percent over two years. With the official inflation rate already at 5.1 percent and the cost of non-discretionary goods and services, including food, housing, petrol and electricity, rising even more rapidly, even the high end of this range will likely mean a wage cut in real terms. The increase would do nothing to compensate teachers for the decade-long wage freeze they have endured.

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The union's other demands are similarly meagre. Like the NSWTF, the IEU is asking for two more hours release from face-to-face teaching per week, a fraction of the unpaid time educators spend on lesson planning, marking and administration. The IEU's other demands, "cut paperwork" and "end staff shortages," are expressed in such broad terms that they are meaningless.

Staff shortages are a longstanding problem in public education, as a result of decades of funding cuts imposed by both Labor and Liberal-National governments. In the Catholic sector, they are bound up with the refusal of the employer to provide adequate resources to its schools, especially those in working class areas. However, on the primary factor driving the present staffing crisis, COVID-19, the unions are silent.

Since the beginning of the year, the education unions have enforced the profit-driven reopening of schools for face-to-face teaching, which has caused the infection of hundreds of thousands of children and teachers and been a major contributor to the ongoing pandemic throughout the country. The conception advanced by the union that staff shortages in schools can be addressed outside of a fight to eliminate COVID-19 is an utter lie.

The unions' function during the pandemic is a stark example of the role they have played for decades, suppressing the opposition of workers to the continual erosion of conditions and real wages and enforcing this assault in one industrial agreement after another.

Teachers increasingly understand that all educators share a common struggle, as comments on the IEU Facebook page illustrate. One teacher wrote: "This rally is about the whole teaching profession and conditions that affect us all (and therefore our students). This is not an us vs them [public school teachers] situation," while another wrote "we need solidarity as teachers—no matter what sector."

Demonstrating a growing recognition that all workers are facing the same situation, one teacher wrote: "Catholic teachers get paid same amount as the public sector and we cannot take industrial action at the same time as public sector but we do in solidarity for all systems and for others such as those in nursing."

In order to suppress such calls for unified action, Australian unions frequently cite the country's draconian industrial relations laws, which prohibit most industrial action outside of narrow bargaining windows, impose tight constraints on pattern bargaining and secondary boycotts and grant the industrial courts the power to outlaw strikes even if they meet the criteria for protected industrial action.

The reality is, these laws were introduced and subsequently strengthened by the union-backed Hawke-Keating and Rudd-Gillard Labor governments, and have been enforced without challenge by the unions ever since.

These laws prevented workers in other sections of the independent school system from legally participating in Friday's strike, although they are covered by the same union. This is because the IEU pushed through enterprise agreements in February granting pay "rises" of just 8.138 percent over four years.

The Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union recently rammed through an enterprise agreement that entrenches intolerable workloads and provides a pay increase of less than 2 percent per annum in the public sector. The agreement has met with broad hostility from educators in Victoria and must serve as a warning to teachers in other parts of the country of the rotten deals being prepared by all of the teacher unions.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), a rank-and-file organisation of educators established by the Socialist Equality Party, is alone in opposing the unions and their sell-out deals.

The CFPE warns teachers, whether in the Catholic, independent or public sector, that they cannot advance their struggle for decent wages, improved conditions and an end to the COVID-19 pandemic within the straitjacket imposed by the union bureaucracy. Instead, the CFPE urges educators to form new, independent, organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, in every school.

Through these committees, educators can unite with their counterparts, public and private, and with broader sections of workers, throughout Australia and around the world, to defeat the deepening attacks on teachers and the entire working class.

The CFPE fights for a fully-funded public school system to provide the highest quality of education, free of charge, as a basic social right of every child, as well as decent pay and conditions for teachers and other education workers. This must be part of a broader struggle for the socialist reorganisation of society to meet the needs of working people, not the profits of the wealthy few. Contact the CFPE to discuss this perspective.

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