

Australia: NSW Teachers Federation complains of no government concessions, after its Term Two strike ban

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15 June 2022

In a damning self-indictment, the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) complained this week that the state government was refusing to grant any, even paltry concessions, in bargaining for a new industrial agreement, despite the union having enforced a ban on strikes for the past month-and-a-half.

The NSWTF reluctantly called the first statewide strikes in over a decade, last December and at the beginning of May. The stoppages were motivated by fear, on the part of the union, that mass hostility among public school teachers to a real wage cut and further attacks on conditions would erupt out of its control.

At the May strike, teachers vocally denounced the NSW Liberal-National Coalition government of Premier Dominic Perrottet. They signaled their willingness to fight Perrottet's offer, which mandates a "wage rise" of 2.5 percent, far below even the official inflation rate of 5.1 percent, and does nothing to address an acute staffing and workload crisis.

The NSWTF responded to that strike by pledging to the government that there would be no further action in Term Two. This was a sign of "good faith" and an attempt by the union bureaucrats to entice Perrottet to the negotiating table.

This no-strike pledge was formally adopted at the May meeting of the union's state council, and again upheld by that body at the beginning of June. The later meeting decreed that instead of stoppages, the federation would organise "campaign lobbying efforts," including protests outside the offices of state parliamentarians.

The purpose was to beg the extreme right-wing Perrottet government to come to a sellout deal with the union, while promoting the fraud that the big business Labor Party, itself responsible for sweeping attacks on public education, would represent a "lesser evil."

The strike ban also had federal implications. The NSWTF actively campaigned for the election of a Labor government in the May federal election and hailed the installation of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, whose administration has

already pledged to carry out deep-going austerity measures and further pro-business restructuring.

As in previous elections, the NSWTF ban was aimed at ensuring that the Labor election campaign was not disrupted by the actions of workers.

Having suppressed teachers' calls for a strike action for the past month-and-a-half, the union has now issued a statement, acknowledging that the Perrottet government's position has not budged an iota.

In a statement on June 14, union president Angelo Gavrielatos pathetically complained: "Unfortunately, the Perrottet government continues to fail students, their families and the teaching profession." He noted that the government, which the union has been pleading with for talks, has shown no intention of offering a nominal pay increase or even cosmetic measures to address the staffing and workload meltdown.

The NSWTF has announced "an historic joint meeting" with the Independent Education Union, covering private schools, on June 21, when the state budget is handed down, to "to determine an appropriate course of action should the government fail to act on the teacher crisis."

Not only has the Perrottet government rebuffed the NSWTF's overtures, it has taken legal action in the Supreme Court, demanding that the union be fined for the May strike. The prospect of substantial financial penalties no doubt animates the bitterness of Gavrielatos, who has adopted the tone of a wounded suitor.

Teachers should be in no doubt. The NSWTF's record throughout the current dispute and over decades, demonstrates that it is seeking to come to an agreement with the government that would do nothing to address the dire situation confronting educators.

The union's demands are grossly inadequate, even on their face value. The NSWTF is calling for pay rises of just 5.1 percent to 7 percent per annum, far below the real cost of living. Under conditions in which teachers, on average, are

performing more than ten hours of unpaid overtime a week, the union is asking only for two extra hours of preparation time a week.

This, under conditions in which working-class schools are reporting that staff shortages are so bad that dozens of scheduled classes per week are not being covered. As of late last year, there were 3,300 staff vacancies across the state. Many schools, especially in regional and working-class areas, face over-enrolments and an infrastructure crisis, relying heavily on permanent demountable buildings for many of their classes.

This situation is the direct result of one sellout industrial agreement after another enforced by the NSWTF. The crisis has worsened over the past decade, as the union ensured that not even one-day strikes were held.

As in other sectors, the COVID pandemic has brought to a head a long-developing crisis of working conditions.

Again, it was the NSWTF that in January enforced the full resumption of face-to-face teaching when the Omicron variant was spreading like wildfire. This “reopening” program, jointly spearheaded by the Perrottet government in NSW and the Victorian state Labor government, was solely aimed at ensuring that parents were forced back into the workplaces so that maximum corporate profits could be realised.

The reopening, overseen by the NSWTF, resulted in an untold number of student and teacher infections, likely in the hundreds of thousands, and the death of at least one educator. Staff shortages, already severe, have become untenable as a result of continuous waves of infection at virtually every school.

The NSWTF now says nothing about COVID. In addition to appealing to Perrottet for a wage-cutting sellout that would only further entrench intolerable conditions, the union is signalling its commitment to the ruling elite’s program of a perpetual pandemic. Teachers and children are to be constantly threatened with a deadly virus, in the interests of big business.

Developments in Victoria are a warning of what is being prepared in NSW. In that state, the Australian Education Union (AEU) this month rammed through a sellout deal, with pay rises of less than 2 percent per annum, nothing to address a similar workload crisis or end the mass COVID outbreaks.

The AEU deal was imposed through misinformation and censorship, in the face of widespread opposition. In the final ballot, only 61.8 percent of teachers and staff who voted ratified the agreement, while 38.2 percent voted “no.”

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), which led the fight against the agreement, has reported that dozens of teachers are leaving the union. Some are expressing interest

in the formation of independent rank-and-file committees to fight the implementation of the agreement.

As the CFPE has explained, such committees are the only means of breaking the isolation imposed by the teacher unions, developing a democratic discussion among educators and planning joint industrial and political action involving teachers, students and parents across the country and internationally.

Above all, this is a political fight. The further attacks on education being pushed by the NSW and Victorian governments, with the crucial assistance of the unions, are part of an austerity agenda being spearheaded at the national level by the Albanese government.

All the administrations, Labor and Coalition, have declared that the working class must pay for the deepening crisis of capitalism and the vast business handouts of the past two years, through budget cuts, a further onslaught on jobs, wages and conditions, and the full brunt of the cost of living crisis.

This raises the need for an alternative socialist perspective. A fully-funded, high quality public education system, with decent pay and conditions for teachers and staff, requires nothing less than the reorganisation of society to meet social needs, not the profit interests of a tiny corporate and financial elite.

Teachers, staff, parents and students are invited to discuss these crucial issues at a CFPE meeting this Sunday, June 19, at 1 p.m. (AEDT) entitled: “The crisis of public education, the betrayal of the teacher unions, and the need for independent rank-and-file committees.” Register here: https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_JrZ17ogiTISsNDAcGeBa3A

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