

Australia: Striking NSW teachers and nurses must fight for unified struggle

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
25 June 2022

Some 140,000 health workers and educators are striking across New South Wales (NSW) next week. More than 50,000 nurses and midwives will stop work on Tuesday, while 70,000 public school teachers and 18,000 Catholic school teachers will strike on Thursday. The state's rail workers are also continuing work bans, including what will be a partial stoppage on Friday.

The NSW strikers join a growing wave of international struggle by the working class. Over the past week, 50,000 British rail workers have held three one-day national rail strikes. General strikes have been launched in Greece, Italy and Belgium in recent weeks, alongside protests and stoppages over recent months on every continent.

All of these struggles are being driven by the global crisis of the capitalist system. Workers everywhere confront the same fundamental issues: soaring inflation, wage cuts, social austerity and the horrific consequences of the official "let it rip" COVID policies.

Hanging over everything is the mounting danger of a world war. Already, the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine is intensifying the cost-of-living crisis, while governments insist that workers must make "sacrifices" for the war effort. In Australia, as everywhere else, there are hundreds of billions of dollars for the military, but virtually nothing for health, education and other social necessities.

The attitude of the British ruling elite to the rail stoppages has been one of intense hostility. The same is the case in regards to the NSW strikes. The state's Liberal-National Premier Dominic Perrottet has declared them illegal and is seeking to quintuple fines for stoppages that are banned by the pro-business Industrial Relations Commission (IRC).

Perrottet's aggressive actions make clear that NSW workers are in a political fight. But their antagonist is not only the NSW premier. He is implementing an agenda agreed to by the entire political establishment, including the federal Labor government and the other state administrations, Labor and Coalition alike.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has signalled that his government will carry out major social spending cuts, including to health and disability services, and has declared its opposition to any "across-the-board" pay rises. Labor governments in Victoria, Queensland and other states are implementing policies identical to those of Perrottet, including a public sector wage cap far beneath the rate of inflation and the imposition of unbearable workloads on health and education staff.

In other words, the NSW strikes are up against not only a state administration, but the austerity drive of the entire political establishment, which is committed to making the working class pay for the deepening economic crisis and the hundreds of billions in handouts to big business during the pandemic.

The unions are isolating workers

The Socialist Equality Party stands full square behind the strikes that are being held. However, we warn that they cannot go forward within the straitjacket of the trade unions, which have done everything they can to isolate workers, prevent a unified mobilisation and lay the grounds for sell-out industrial agreements.

Perrottet has advanced his threat of fines, in part to provide the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA), along with the Teachers' Federation (NSWTF) and the Independent Education Union, which covers the Catholic sector, with a pretext to call the strikes off. This would be consistent with everything the unions have done in the course of disputes that have been ongoing for more than six months.

At every point, the unions have sought to divide workers. The NSWNMA has called two previous nurses strikes, without making any attempt to mobilise other health workers. This week, the unions have timed the stoppages, so that nurses, educators and rail workers are all involved in action on separate days.

The unions have only begrudgingly called strikes, when they have been compelled to do so as a result of demands from their membership. They have ensured that they are spasmodic and confined to letting off steam. At the same time, the NSWTF has instituted two protracted strike bans this year, in a sign of "good faith" to the Perrottet government that is attacking the educators it claims to represent.

These strike bans have been only one aspect of the union collaboration with the state Liberal government. The NSWTF presided over the return to face-to-face teaching in term one, despite the Omicron surge. The reopening of the schools, overseen by Perrottet and Labor Premier Daniel Andrews in Victoria, was the spearhead for the lifting of all safety measures. This pro-business agenda, prioritising profit over health and lives, was supported openly or tacitly by the NSWNMA and every other union.

The "let it rip" program has produced a catastrophe. Tens or hundreds of thousands of students and teachers have been infected, as the schools have been transformed into mass vectors of the virus. The hospitals are permanently overwhelmed, with not enough staff or beds to meet surging demand.

But the pandemic has only exacerbated dire conditions that already existed. For years, teachers have been beset by a staffing crisis, massive workloads and overcrowding in working-class schools, as successive governments have cut public education to the bone. In the hospitals too, nurses and doctors faced bed shortages and insufficient staffing long before pandemic.

The unions do not want to mention COVID, because they support

the “let it rip” agenda of a perpetual pandemic. They also do not want to discuss how the dire conditions in health and education emerged.

The reality is that the NSWTF and all of the health unions have collaborated for decades with Labor and Liberal-National governments that have instituted sweeping cuts to both sectors. One sell-out industrial agreement after another has been imposed by the unions, enforcing pay caps and doing nothing to address workloads or any other issue of conditions. Over the same period, the unions have suppressed any industrial action. Prior to last December, there had not been a NSW teachers strike in over a decade. The same was the case for nurses.

The SEP warns that new sell-outs are being prepared. That was signalled by the NSWNMA’s decision to hail Perrottet’s pitiful offer of a three percent per annum pay rise. The nurses union has demanded less than five percent per annum, beneath official inflation, while the NSWTF has called for pay rises of between five and seven percent, less than the rapidly rising cost of living.

The union demands on conditions would also amount to a sell-out. The NSWTF is requesting just two hours of extra preparation time, under conditions where teachers are already doing more than ten hours of unpaid overtime a week on average.

Developments in Victoria are a warning. In that state, the Australian Education Union partnered with the Andrews Labor government, to impose on teachers a sell-out deal with pay rises of less than two percent per annum and not a single measure to address the workload or staffing crisis. Dozens of teachers have resigned from the union, while more than 38 percent voted against the deal, which was rammed through via a union campaign of misinformation and censorship.

The unions are playing the same role everywhere. They function as an industrial and political police force for governments and the corporations, committed, above all, to suppressing the class struggle and chaining workers to the big business Labor Party.

For workers’ rank-and-file committees!

The alternative is for workers to take matters into their own hands. The SEP has initiated the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the Health Workers’ Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC), to spearhead the fight for new organisations of working-class struggle.

We call for the establishment of rank-and-file committees in all hospitals, schools and workplaces, independent of the unions and controlled by workers themselves. Such committees are the only means to break the isolation operations of the unions, to facilitate the widest democratic discussion among workers and to prepare a unified counter-offensive against the onslaught on wages and conditions.

In the first instance, a network of rank-and-file committees in health, education and rail would lay the basis for a united mobilisation of the 400,000 public sector workers across NSW, who are part of the largest workforce in Australia and who all confront a government pay cap.

This must be the starting point of a turn to broader sections of workers, including education and health workers across the country and internationally. The conditions facing staff in these sectors, moreover, are a microcosm of what increasingly confronts the entire working class, amid soaring inflation, interest rate rises and social spending cuts.

The SEP, CFPE and HWRFC propose that workers take up the following demands, as the starting point of a fight for their social rights:

- An immediate across-the-board pay increase of more than 20 percent. 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 health workers to end the current punishing workloads.
- Implement minimum nurse-to-patient ratios, and maximum school class sizes of 18–20 students
- Implement the necessary public health care measures to combat COVID-19 in schools, including mask wearing, social distancing and ventilation, as part of a broader program to eliminate the virus.
- Initiate an urgent construction program for high quality schools and hospitals in working class communities.
- Massively expand spending on public health and education to ensure workers are equipped with all the necessary resources to do their job safely and to the highest standard. End the privatisation of essential social services.

Governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, along with the unions, corporate media and all those who defend capitalism, will claim there is “no money” for these demands. This is a lie. The resources exist, but they are hoarded by a tiny financial and corporate elite.

The only way they can be freed up, and redirected to meet social need, is through the fight for a workers’ government, which would implement socialist policies, including placing the banks and the corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control. Society must be run to meet the needs of working people, not the profit demands of a tiny oligarchy!

This is an international fight, which requires the unity of workers all over the world. That is why the SEP, the CFPE and the HWRFC urge workers in Australia to join with their class brothers and sisters in the fight to build the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

We call on educators, health workers, rail staff and all other workers seeking to fight for their social interests to contact us today and begin a discussion on the establishment of rank-and-file committees.

Health Workers’ Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC)

Email: sephw.aus@gmail.com

Committee for Public Education

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout/

Facebook: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [@CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)

Socialist Equality Party (SEP)

Email: sep@sep.org.au

Facebook: [SocialistEqualityPartyAustralia](https://www.facebook.com/SocialistEqualityPartyAustralia)

Twitter: [@SEP_Australia](https://twitter.com/SEP_Australia)

Instagram: [socialistequalityparty_au](https://www.instagram.com/socialistequalityparty_au)

TikTok: [@SEP_Australia](https://www.tiktok.com/@SEP_Australia)



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[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)