

# Australia: Striking NSW teachers oppose intolerable working conditions and pay cuts

Our reporters  
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Today, teachers in New South Wales (NSW), the country's most populous state, are striking in both the public and Catholic systems. Up to 90,000 educators are participating.

The stoppage comes in the same week as a strike by NSW nurses on Tuesday and expanded work bans by rail workers on Friday. It follows strikes by other public sector workers over the past month. Workers are opposing a public sector pay cap which limits annual wage rises to 3 percent, well below inflation. For nurses and educators there is also the issue of intolerable workloads and staff shortages.

Despite the commonality of the struggle, the unions are desperately seeking to divide workers and suppress discussion of the political issues they all confront. For nurses and public school teachers this is the third one day stoppage in recent months.

Each time, the respective unions have called for limited one day stoppages and then banned further action, giving the government time to "come to the table." They have promoted the Labor Party as an alternative to the state's Liberal-National administration, despite the complete bipartisanship of the profit-driven austerity agenda.

All of these tactics are being used to suppress opposition by allowing workers to let off steam while grinding them down to prepare the way for a sell-out deal.

The New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF), which covers public school teachers, and the Independent Education Union (IEU), which covers teachers in non-government schools, were compelled to call a joint strike for fear that the rising anger among educators, who are facing exactly the same conditions, would break out of the two unions' control. This is the first time in more than 20 years that public and Catholic

educators have taken joint industrial action.

The public education system in Australia, which has been in crisis for decades, has been brought to a breaking point by the COVID-19 pandemic. Classes in schools are regularly cancelled or combined, with students spending a large fraction of the school day on so-called "minimum supervision," a euphemism for herding kids into halls and onto ovals to work independently due to lack of staff.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to several teachers ahead of Thursday's strike. We have changed the names of the teachers we interviewed as they are not permitted to speak out on conditions in schools.

**James**, a high school teacher from regional NSW, said, "I've never seen so many different industries striking at one time. But why isn't there any unification of these struggles? We are all striking for the same reason, teachers, nurses, every worker striking has seen their conditions erode beneath them as budgets are cut and billions of dollars are poured into the drive for war."

**Susan**, a specialist teacher in primary literacy from Sydney, has been an educator for 18 years. She works at a large primary school in metropolitan Sydney with more than 60 staff. She said, "I'm all for the strike. Teachers are so undervalued and underpaid. With several post graduate qualifications and a masters degree, in any other profession I would receive recognition and remuneration, but not in teaching.

"I think we deserve to be paid like the professionals we are, like doctors or lawyers. The way the community and government treat teachers in Australia is nothing more than a babysitter.

"What we fight for, we all need to get, so we should stand together. If it takes 40 days of strikes like years ago, that's what it takes. We deserve more than the

government offers, we were there through the pandemic and still got nothing but criticism. Teachers need a huge pay rise, less workload and to be recognised as professionals.”

Susan said that workload was driving more teachers from the profession. She noted that about 20 percent of the teachers at her school had either left or were planning to leave. In particular she said that the administration load was the main problem. This had meant that “teachers with loads of experience are going casual so they can teach and nothing more.”

**Pamela**, a public high school teacher said “The main issue for me is the workload. I am a casual teacher and have been doing a 6 month block of teaching this year. The problem is the amount of work we are expected to do and the amount of time to do it.

“I am expected to do administrative work that I’ve never been trained to do. We have a top-heavy bureaucracy whose job it is to crack the whip on teachers, ensure the i’s are dotted, the t’s are crossed. It makes for stress and anxiety.”

**Brendan**, a Catholic school teacher from regional NSW, said “In the pandemic we were essential workers, but now we’re having to fight for a living wage. Teaching conditions have been neglected for decades, it will take a lot more than the few percent increase that the unions are calling for to get conditions back, it would take billions.”

**Peter** is a primary teacher from regional New South Wales with more than 30 years teaching experience. He explained that the staffing crisis existed well before COVID, but that governments had refused to act to address the real issues in public education.

On the strike Peter said, “For 15 or 20 years we have been saying that work overload is the main factor that is causing burnout. Simply paying teachers more is not going to take away work overload and at the moment teachers in NSW are working on average 61 hours a week. A lot of it has to do with collecting data and standardised testing and the paperwork that teachers have to do on a daily basis. Education is at a crisis point. This has never been more visible than it is now.”

As an illustration, Peter said, “I know of one teacher, she lasted a week in the classroom as a graduate teacher. After one week she quit teaching altogether, saying ‘I had no idea it was like this.’ It was the absolute hammering of all the datafication, all the

compliance training, all the administration, the constant meetings, the standardised testing. She realised very quickly that the government not only tells us what to teach but it’s now telling us how to teach it.”

On COVID, Peter said, “schools were forced to open not because it was better for the kids but because it kept business going. A great many teachers felt that their job had been reduced to nothing more than babysitting.”

With regard to the teacher shortages and overwhelming workload, Peter said, “Education policy is being developed through expediency not through best practice. The Labor Party doesn’t say anything because they don’t have a policy that is any different.”

The Committee for Public Education is leading the fight to establish rank-and-file committees of teachers, parents and staff, independent of the corporatised trade unions. These are the only means for educators to take matters into their own hands and to begin a unified struggle for jobs, wages and conditions. Contact the CFPE here:

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