

Australia: Tens of thousands of striking teachers protest in Sydney

Martin Scott**30 June 2022**

Tens of thousands of public school teachers struck across New South Wales (NSW) yesterday, alongside Catholic system educators in NSW and the Australian Capital Territory.

An estimated 20,000 teachers protested outside the NSW state parliament in Sydney, while thousands more attended rallies in 15 regional cities as part of the first joint strike by public and Catholic school educators since 1996.

Addressing the Sydney rally yesterday, officials from the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) and the Independent Education Union (IEU) issued plaintive appeals to NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet and the Liberal-National government to come to the negotiating table, continuing with the bankrupt approach of the previous strikes.

NSWTF deputy president Henry Rajendra remarked on the "incredible unprecedented turnout," and IEU secretary Mark Northam noted that tensions had "reached boiling point." But far from calling for a stepped-up fight by educators, the bureaucrats redoubled their attempts to channel workers' anger into illusions that "Mr Perrottet" and the Catholic employers could be pressured into improving wages and conditions for teachers.

NSWTF president Angelo Gavrielatos did not advance a single concrete demand. While the union has previously called for a pay rise of between 5.1 and 7 percent, this was replaced yesterday with a call for Perrottet to "scrap the cap." The clear logic of this is to prepare teachers to accept a pay "increase" below the meagre figures previously advanced.

Gavrielatos may well have decided to avoid naming a figure for fear of a repeat of what happened at the NSW nurses' stop-work meeting on Tuesday. A motion from the floor calling for a 7 percent pay claim was passed by nurses against the protest of NSW Nurses and Midwives Association secretary Brett Holmes, who warned, "three percent is terrible, but zero is worse." He then contemptuously spat out to his members, declaring: "Feel free to roll me [i.e., vote against him], I'm in a much better financial position at my end of my career than you are."

The abandonment of demands for a pay rise that come close to matching the rapidly rising cost of living also fits with the austerity agenda of the newly elected federal Labor government. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and his government have quickly exchanged their election promise of "a better future" for an insistence that workers must make "sacrifices."

At the state level, Labor opposition leader Chris Minns has called for "productivity-based bargaining" for the NSW public sector. In other words, under a Labor government, workers will be forced to step up output, trading hard-won conditions for any, even sub-inflationary increase in pay.

This wage-cutting perspective is enforced by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) whose president, Sally McManus, stated that "across-the-board pay increases of 5 or 7 percent is Boomer fantasy land."

This is the Labor agenda that Gavrielatos was promoting when he declared yesterday, "we will keep campaigning until next March" when the state election is being held. In fact the strike action by teachers and the state's nurses two days before has been surreptitiously transformed into an election campaign for the state Labor Party, which has supported every regressive measure and wage cutting program of the Perrottet government and whose policy platform for the election is almost indistinguishable from it.

COVID-19 continues to have a devastating impact in schools. In addition to the direct threat of infection, illness and death, the virus has exacerbated all of the longstanding issues teachers confront.

Workload has been drastically increased, as teachers have been forced to prepare and deliver online lessons, without adequate resources or training, and at times simultaneously with face-to-face instruction. Rampant infection of educators has worsened the staffing crisis, meaning teachers are regularly called upon to supervise multiple classes.

There can be no doubt that the pandemic has been a decisive factor driving teachers back into struggle after a decade of union suppression.

Yet the deadly virus did not rate a single mention at the

Sydney rally. While every speaker raised crippling staff shortages, regular cancellation or combining of classes, and teachers being under pressure to come in sick, they were entirely silent on COVID-19.

This is because the NSWTF, the IEU and all other unions, as well as Labor at the state, territory and federal level, are in complete agreement with the homicidal “let it rip” COVID-19 policies and played a critical role in the reckless reopening of schools at the beginning of the year.

Teachers are demanding an end to the wage cap that has limited pay rises for all NSW public sector workers to 2.5 percent per annum for more than a decade, and has recently been temporarily increased to just 3 percent, far below the rapidly rising cost of living.

While the cap does not formally apply to the Catholic system, the Church typically follows the government’s lead on teacher pay. This is an example of the broader significance of the growing wave of industrial action by public sector workers. As the largest employer in the country, the NSW government is a major influence on wages and conditions throughout the country, in the private sector as well as the public.

While the ever diminishing real wage levels imposed on teachers were of great concern, the strike was essentially motivated by intolerable workloads, with teachers routinely working 60 hours or more per week. This is a product of increasing levels of administrative work required of teachers, as well as longstanding staff shortages exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

For public sector teachers, this is the third statewide strike since December in a dispute the NSWTF has dragged out, in order to wear down workers and prepare them to accept a sell-out deal.

Twice, the NSWTF has enforced strike bans on the phony premise of “good faith” negotiations with the Liberal-National government, which has made completely clear it will not deliver a pay “rise” in line with inflation or address any of the teachers’ other concerns.

Workers at yesterday’s rallies commented that, while the combined strike was a step in the right direction, they did not understand why they had not gone out together with nurses and other public sector workers, as they have demanded in previous rallies.

In fact, the joint strike was a calculated move by the IEU and NSWTF. The purpose was to appease workers demands for unified action with a show of solidarity designed to conceal the continued isolation of workers and suppress an independent mobilisation of broader layers of workers.

The unions are highly conscious that the teacher strikes are taking place in the context of a global resurgence of the working class that is finding sharp expression in the NSW

public sector.

This week alone, 50,000 nurses and midwives stopped work on Tuesday, while rail workers have stepped up industrial action over pay and safety concerns, including a ban today on operating most of the state’s rail fleet. Last month, tens of thousands of public sector workers covered by the Public Service Association (PSA) struck for 24 hours, also against the punitive wage cap.

It is to these workers that teachers must look. A unified mobilisation of the more than 400,000 workers in the NSW public sector could provide the basis for a turn to broader sections of workers across the country and around the world, who are also entering into struggle amid rapidly rising inflation, the ongoing pandemic, and the escalating threat of global conflict.

The conditions facing NSW public sector workers, moreover, are identical to those in every other state whose union leaders and state governments are desperately trying to prevent the NSW action from spreading throughout the country.

There is no way forward within the straitjacket of the unions, whose role is to isolate workers and suppress any threat to the political establishment or corporate profits.

Instead, what is required is the formation of rank-and-file committees in every school, completely independent of the unions, to reach out to workers throughout the public sector and more broadly and take up a unified struggle for real wage increases and decent, safe conditions for all.

Ultimately, what is needed is a socialist perspective. Fully-funded, high quality education systems, with decent pay and conditions for all workers, require nothing less than the reorganisation of society to meet social needs, not the profit interests of a tiny corporate and financial elite.

The SEP has initiated the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) to lead the fight by teachers for this perspective. We urge educators to contact the CFPE today.

Committee for Public Education

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