

Australia: Striking teachers in New South Wales speak out

Our reporters
1 July 2022

On Thursday, teachers across New South Wales (NSW) took part in a strike against real wage cuts and increasingly intolerable conditions in education.

Around 20,000 educators 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.

While workers welcomed the combined teacher strike, they wondered why broader strikes had not been called, involving nurses and rail workers, who also took industrial action in NSW this week, along with others across the public sector.

In fact, the joint strike was designed by the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) and the Independent Education Union (IEU) to conceal their continued isolation of workers and suppression of any mobilisation of broader layers of workers.

NSWTF president Angelo Gavrielatos did not raise any concrete demands, including on pay. This indicates that the union is preparing workers to accept a wage “rise” below the already inadequate figure of between 5.1 and 7 percent previously advanced by the union.

Gavrielatos vowed to “keep campaigning until next March,” making clear that the unions are seeking to transform the industrial action into an election campaign for the NSW Labor Party, which, like the newly elected federal Labor government, is committed to the same wage-cutting agenda as the Liberal-National Coalition.

This underscores the importance of the Socialist Equality Party’s call for teachers and other workers to take matters into their own hands, through the formation of independent rank-and-file committees and a political struggle against the entire establishment, including Labor.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to **Sarah**, a primary school teacher at a public school in Sydney. “I have been teaching for about eight years and it doesn’t get any easier each year, as I would’ve anticipated. I love my school, but it is not my school that is the issue, it’s the workload.

“I’ll be honest with you, I’ve considered many times over the year what I want to do moving forward. The thought of doing this for another 40 years is very daunting to me.

“COVID made me realise the lack of flexibility in the job. I

have friends who work in offices, they can work from home. We have been sent back and we are on a tight schedule every single day. I leave home at 7:30 a.m. in the morning, as soon as 9 o’clock hits, it’s go time, whether you’re ready or not and there is no stopping from there. I have meetings at lunch daily, it’s nonstop. I’m lucky to get to the toilet once in a day, very often I don’t eat lunch till after 2 p.m.,” she said.

“I’m in an executive role so I am constantly looking for casuals. There are times when I have to cold call 40 different people to cover a class. I’m not looking at their CVs anymore, if they have approval to teach, that is good enough. I just need a body in the room, because otherwise I’m splitting the classes.

“Teachers need more planning time, more time to collaborate and more time for experienced teachers to support beginning teachers. I’ve got teachers in their first year who are already questioning whether teaching is what they want to do.

“There aren’t a whole lot of teachers older than me. For someone who has been teaching for eight years to be in an executive position and be one of the more experienced teachers, what does that say? I feel I’ve got so much more to learn, but there isn’t a pool of more experienced teachers because we’re not maintaining our staff,” she said.

Asked about united action with nurses and others in the public sector, she said: “I feel like we’re all in it together. We’re all bound by these wage caps. We all continued working through COVID. We all want to be able to do our jobs properly, to have a balance within our lives.”

Ivy, a teacher at a Western Sydney Catholic school with ten years’ experience, said: “We are so exhausted, we are underpaid, it just doesn’t feel worth it anymore. But we do love the kids, so I feel like the kids and our relationships that we’ve built in our schools are the things that really glue us to the profession. However, that glue is running out.

“We’re also human beings and we have families and we have lives outside of teaching and whilst we’re passionate about teaching, we’re also passionate about our families and our spare time.

“I think that it’s fantastic that public sector and Catholic sector teachers are on strike together. Everyone needs to see that, wherever we teach, we are all teachers.”

Asked about the need for a unified struggle with nurses and

other workers, Ivy said: “I think that would be great. Going out on strike, we need a lot more people to come out to be as one. I’m not sure why it hasn’t happened yet, but I think that the fact that people are talking about it is a good step. Now we just need to put it into action.”

Ivy said a pay “increase” of 10–15 percent over two years, as the IEU is demanding, would do nothing to improve teacher retention or attract new graduates to the increasingly challenging profession.

She said: “I think that the nature of teaching in general is just getting harder, with all the different strategies and technologies. The pay needs to match the demand of knowing more and doing more. If it doesn’t, then why would you want to get into teaching. If you don’t feel valued while you’re doing it, then of course you’re going to leave.”

About 200 striking teachers from northern NSW joined the rally at Tweed Heads, where they heard four local speakers outline the dire situation in schools, before listening to the broadcast from Sydney.

Jan, who has been a teacher for 30 years, said rising workloads and administrative burdens—“all the ticking of boxes for people above me”—meant she felt she could not give enough to her students.

“It’s just obvious that we have to have a pay increase at the same rate as inflation. I don’t understand why governments don’t value people like nurses, teachers and the people that have always been there, always will be... We are teaching the next generation and the nurses are keeping them alive.”

Asked about the role of the unions in keeping nurses, teachers and other public sector workers isolated from each other, Jan said: “Yes, we need to join together, unification is the only way it’s going to work... like transport workers and teachers, we all have a common need.”

Jan agreed that capitalism itself was the source of the problems worldwide. “People don’t realise because they have not been educated,” she said. “So we keep going, we keep fighting.”

Chalkie, who is now a casual, working two days a week after teaching for 45 years, said the job was “too hard.” He explained: “I still do it because I like kids, but it’s as hard as it’s ever been. It was difficult in the 80s and 90s but now it’s ridiculous.”

He added: “They’re not paying enough to attract people and instead they’ve got a strategy for poaching people, but teacher shortages are a worldwide problem.”

Asked what he thought teachers should do, he said: “We should refuse to do the job. The ultimate right of people is to withdraw their labour and continue to do so.”

The veteran teacher did not agree with the unions keeping strikes separated. “In 1975 we went out in Wollongong, as teacher trainees, and the steelworkers supported us. They came to our meetings. It’s been done before.”

Gemma, a primary school teacher in learning and support at

the Newcastle rally, said: “I haven’t been able to work in my role this year, I’ve had to teach on class because teachers are just not available, so I haven’t really had the opportunity to do my actual job. With staffing shortages and COVID, teachers are away all the time and we just can’t get staff. There’s been a few days where we’ve operated at 50 percent of staff and we’ve had to collapse classes.

“At my school, there’s not many teachers who are permanent. There’s no job security. You don’t even get a phone call, you’re just told five minutes before you’re supposed to start that your day’s not going to be what you thought it was.”

Asked about the SEP’s call for workers to build rank-and-file committees, to unite their struggles and discuss and develop demands, she said: “I’m all for workers uniting, I think all the sectors deserve a pay increase to meet inflation. And it’s not just about the pay, for teaching it’s about that time that we’re not getting to plan and do our job properly.

“Absolutely, we should be able to discuss what we need. We need more staff, and I think at least four hours a week to plan our work and not have to do it overnight or on the weekend, two hours isn’t enough.”

Another teacher at the Newcastle rally, who asked to remain anonymous, said: “Approximately one third of teachers are casual. There are positions which should be made permanent but they aren’t being made permanent. These workers are in a tricky situation, where they don’t have any job security.

“If there’s a new government, it will be the same, neither Labor nor Liberal will change anything or resolve the big issues. What the government wants are just measurable things to validate the job that they are doing. If you can’t measure it then it’s not important.

“COVID is terrible, it’s something that isn’t discussed but it is a massive part of our teacher shortage at the moment, but that’s never mentioned.”

The Committee for Public Education is spearheading the fight for workers’ rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, in schools across Australia. Contact it here:

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