

Australia: NSW teachers union blocks industrial action yet again

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In an effort to prevent a unified fight by New South Wales (NSW) public sector workers against wage-cutting, job destruction, unsafe COVID conditions and impossible workloads, the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) last month blocked industrial action by its members for the third time in the past year.

Just as thousands of public sector nurses and rail workers took action, despite being constrained by their own unions, the NSWTF gave Premier Dominic Perrottet's Liberal-National Coalition state government a virtual no-strike pledge for Term 3 of the school year.

That was despite the government defiantly refusing to meet teachers' demands for wage rises to cope with soaring inflation, reduced work burdens and the filling of staff shortages.

As a diversion, the union has directed teachers to collect data throughout the term on the unprecedented level of teacher shortages and share it with parliamentarians—as if the politicians, whether Coalition, Labor or Greens, were unaware of the crisis throughout the government school system.

This latest no-strike undertaking confirms the warnings made by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) that the chief concern of all the public sector union bureaucracies is to keep workers' struggles separated and prevent the anger and opposition from developing into a broader mobilisation against the state and federal governments.

From the outset of its protracted negotiations with the government, the NSWTF has silenced teachers' voices, staged limited one-day strikes and kept teachers isolated from other workers.

Moreover, the union's log of claims for sub-inflation 5 percent annual pay rises for teachers, (compared to 7.5 percent for principals and other school executives) and two hours of additional lesson preparation time

would do nothing to address the appalling conditions that teachers face.

The data that teachers are now being urged to supply to the union is supposed to include extra classes teachers are assigned, lesson planning time they lose, merged classes, classes impacted by minimal supervision and collapsed programs, including targeted individual support. This exercise itself will only increase teachers' workloads.

The NSWTF claimed its goal was to use the data to “simultaneously increase pressure on the Perrottet government to engage in meaningful negotiations while establishing the foundations for an electoral strategy should the government fail to act.”

But the Perrottet government has already repeatedly defied “pressure.” It has rebuffed teachers' demands, despite three one-day strikes in December, May and June, because the union has confined its members to such limited stoppages and kept them separate from those held by nurses, rail workers and other public sector workers.

Nor would the election of a state Labor government next March advance the interests of teachers, students and parents. As the federal Labor government has demonstrated already since taking office in May, Labor's program consists of imposing “sacrifice” and “tough medicine” on workers in order to satisfy the requirements of big business and the financial markets.

The NSWTF's “electoral strategy” is to subordinate teachers to the same Labor Party that, in collaboration with the Australian Education Union, recently imposed an agreement on teachers in neighbouring Victoria which will see salaries “rise” by less than 2 percent annually, far below the inflation rate, and do nothing to reduce teachers' untenable workloads.

Likewise in July, the State School Teachers Union of

Western Australia signed off on a 2.75 percent annual pay “rise” offered by that state’s Labor government. The Queensland Teachers Union has struck a similarly regressive deal with the state’s Labor government, and teachers in the Northern Territory are fighting a four-year public sector wage freeze imposed by the territory’s Labor administration.

Last December, the NSWTF called its first statewide strike in ten years—a decade of escalating assault on public schools and their teachers. The union reluctantly called the strike out of fear that the hostility of educators to the disastrous conditions in the schools, underfunding, privatisation, onerous workloads, increased high-stakes testing and unsafe pandemic conditions would erupt out of the union’s control.

As soon teachers returned from the summer break, the NSWTF guaranteed Perrottet a strike-free Term 1. But still-worsening conditions, magnified by the pandemic disaster let loose by the union’s enforcement of the return to classrooms, triggered walkouts at schools.

Schools became petri dishes for the spread of the virus, compounding teacher shortages, as a result of the union’s support for the profit-driven “live with the virus” offensive. The union was compelled to call another limited one-day strike in May, at the start of Term 2.

Then, to ensure that Labor’s campaign for the May 21 federal election was not disrupted, the NSWTF suppressed industrial action for another month and a half. Finally, as tensions in schools reached boiling point, the NSWTF and the Independent Education Union (IEU) called a joint strike on June 30, the first combined stoppage by government and Catholic system teachers in over two decades.

At June 30 strike rallies, the union leaders signalled a transformation of their campaign into an election effort for the state Labor party. “We will keep campaigning until next March,” declared NSWTF president Angelo Gavrielatos.

While the NSWTF straitjackets teachers, the Perrottet government is pushing ahead with its pro-market agenda to “transform education in NSW.” Teachers are to be provided with a “sequenced curriculum,” which the government claims will reduce teachers’ workloads by three hours per week. Tenders have been sent to edu-businesses with the process to roll out by Term 4.

This “transformation” is a further attack on public

education. Overcrowded classrooms filled with students with multiple needs will see learning further narrowed to fit the needs of business. The role of classroom teachers will become even more that of assessors and data collectors.

The plan also paves the way for the replacement of qualified teachers by less qualified and lower-paid staff. Already, according to one estimate, in NSW 20 percent to 30 percent of final year education students are employed in classrooms. Around Australia, students in their first, second or third year of study are being recruited into teaching roles.

Another government plan is to pay a limited number of “master teachers” a significant pay rise, up to \$130,000 annually. This will seek to divide teachers, with such appointments linked to achieving “performance targets.”

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), a rank-and-file teachers’ network initiated by the SEP, has warned that the NSWTF and other trade unions are the chief obstacle to a broader mobilisation of the working class, starting with public sector workers, against ongoing real pay cuts and increasingly onerous working conditions.

The CFPE is fighting for a genuine industrial and political struggle against this assault by both Labor and Coalition governments. It calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to unify teachers across the country, with public sector and other sections of the working class, to fight the drive by the corporate elite and its governments to make workers pay for the crisis of the capitalist system that has been fuelled by the pandemic and inflation.

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