

# Australian state teachers' union capitulates before Liberal government wage cutting drive

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9 October 2022

In the face of an aggressive drive by the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National government to cut public school teachers' wages, the NSW Teachers Federation has made clear its complicity.

Rejecting strike action, the union bureaucracy has announced a so-called "day of action" on Wednesday. This would be more accurately characterised as a day of inaction, or a day of diversions. The union's initiative consists of a one hour rally in western Sydney at 7.30 a.m. Overworked teachers are being asked to get up early, attend the union event and then rush to school in time for the morning bell. In regional NSW, teachers are advised to rally outside the offices of government parliamentarians. Then for the rest of the day, the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) has asked school workers to wear red clothes.

The union's announcement was met with widespread derision and hostility. On the NSWTF Facebook page, hundreds of teachers commented, with large numbers demanding strikes. One wrote: "I agree fully with all teachers on this page who call upon the Teachers' Federation to act more decisively and plan a full day strike on Wednesday. We are only inconveniencing ourselves and our own families with this 'action.' I can't see many members supporting it, to be honest."

Numerous comments denounced the union, with one comment noting: "Looks like this is the week lots of people quit the NSW Teachers Federation."

The "day of action" is timed to coincide with a hearing of the Industrial Relations Commission. The pro-business industrial court has been convened by the state government as a mechanism to ram through nominal wage increases for public school teachers of just 2.53 per cent per annum for the next three years.

This would represent a significant real wage cut. The official inflation rate of 6.1 percent is projected to rise to 8 percent by the end of this year. The real cost-of-living

pressures confronting working people are even higher, with petrol prices recently increasing by 55 percent and rent up by 9.5 percent.

In addition, the government is offering nothing to alleviate teachers' intolerable workload, under conditions where Australian teachers work among the longest hours in the OECD.

NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet's provocative moves to impose a real wage cut on teachers are driven by his determination to impose austerity cuts to public spending. This is aimed at cutting New South Wales' enormous deficit, currently \$11.3 billion, and debt, forecast to rise to \$114.8 billion by 2025-26. This is the worst financial situation of any state government in Australia, excepting Victoria.

The premier is also proceeding with an ideological offensive against the public education system. He is seeking to implement a barrage of reactionary measures, many dating back to the 19th century. This includes so-called performance pay for teachers, based on their students' standardised test results.

Perrottet has also boasted of promoting the "3 R's" (reading, writing, arithmetic) while moving to narrow the curriculum to the "basics," in line with business demands for a more readily exploitable and productive workforce. Such moves will not affect the children of the ultra-wealthy, whose elite schools will continue to feature state of the art infrastructure for music, performance, and athletics.

In recent speeches, Perrottet has also demanded greater discipline in schools. He has cited as his model the Michaela school in Britain, which is run along military boot camp lines. Students walk between classes in single file along a black line without speaking. Rote-learning is central. "Demerits" are handed out for infractions such as looking out of a window and slouching during a lesson.

The Perrottet government's offensive against the public

education system is only possible because of the role played by the NSWTF. The affluent union bureaucracy has systematically demobilised teachers and school workers, and blocked the development of a unified struggle with other public sector workers facing similar attacks.

Since October 2021, when discussions commenced between the NSW Education Department and the NSWTF over the salaries and conditions award, the union bureaucracy has signalled its determination to do everything possible to straitjacket teachers and ram through a sell-out deal.

The union's log of claims, which it had no intention of actually fighting for, itself amounted to a pre-emptive giveaway. The wage claim was for a 5 per cent pay rise for teachers with 7.5 per cent for school executives, below the rate of inflation. In the face of a well documented excess workload and unpaid overtime crisis, the NSWTF only requested an additional two hours of lesson planning time a week.

Nothing whatsoever has been raised over the COVID-19 pandemic and the safety and wellbeing of school workers. Like their counterparts across Australia, the NSWTF has enforced within the schools the irresponsible "let it rip" policy of eliminating all public health measures and allowing unchecked infection across the population.

The Perrottet government has intransigently refused to provide the NSWTF with a single even superficial concession that would provide the bureaucracy with the required pretext to ram through another sellout agreement. The union knows it sits atop a powder keg, with enormous anger within the schools over intolerable working conditions. This is why the union called three one-day strikes, in December 2021 and May and June this year, the first in a decade. Each action was accompanied by subsequent no-strike pledges and appeals to the government to commit to "good faith bargaining" with the union.

The NSWTF is now promoting the Labor Party ahead of the state election scheduled for March next year. Union president Angelo Gavrielatos (annual salary and benefits \$254,000) hailed Labor's announcement last Thursday that if elected it will "instruct the Department of Education to immediately begin negotiations with the union ... with a view to reaching a comprehensive agreement to reduce workloads and make salaries more competitive."

This vague pledge is not worth the paper it is written on.

Perrottet enjoys the active support of the federal Labor government as well as the state Labor premiers, most notably Victoria's Daniel Andrews. The Andrews Labor government recently worked with the Australian Education Union to impose an enormous real wage cut on public school teachers, with base salaries nominally rising by less than 2 percent a year for the next four years.

NSW state Labor opposition leader, Chris Minns, has made clear that all public sector wages will be subject to "productivity-based bargaining," meaning that any nominal wage rises, even sub-inflationary, will be accompanied by additional workloads and worse working conditions.

The struggle for decent wages and conditions must be taken out of the hands of the union bureaucracy. To advance their fight, teachers require new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees built in every school and community, developed independently from the NSWTF.

Against the divide and rule strategy of the unions, such committees can unite public, Catholic and independent school workers with other sections of the working class confronting similar attacks, above all the hundreds of thousands of public sector workers including nurses, child-care workers, rail workers, bus drivers, and ambulance employees. This is a political struggle which must be advanced against the Perrottet government and its industrial courts, as well as the federal Labor government of Anthony Albanese.

Teachers, staff, parents and students are encouraged to contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) which fights for this perspective.

**Email:** [cfpe.aus@gmail.com](mailto:cfpe.aus@gmail.com)

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

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