

Australian teachers' union leader concedes to government wage cutting offensive

Max Boddy
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New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) president Angelo Gavrielatos issued a video recorded speech on Wednesday addressing public school teachers. He made clear the union will mount no opposition to the substantial real wage cut being imposed by the state Liberal government through the pro-business Industrial Relations Commission (IRC).

Gavrielatos's speech was prompted by an IRC hearing on the finalisation of an award for NSW teachers, including a nominal pay increase of just 2.53 percent. This is a cut in real terms as official inflation is at 6.1 percent, set to reach 7.75 percent by the end of the year.

Gavrielatos told teachers that the government wants to impose this pay cut in a three-year award and that their "legal team" will "do everything possible to avoid the government's desired outcome." What this amounted to was requests at the IRC hearing for the new award to be over a two-year period, rather than three.

Foreshadowing an IRC ruling that delivers everything the government wants, and raising the white flag in advance, Gavrielatos stated that the IRC "cannot operate outside the corrupted legal parameters set by the government on the salary cap. And as you also know, the IRC is incapable of addressing matters related to your workload."

Instead of outlining any form of strategy to combat Premier Dominic Perrottet and his anti-public education agenda, Gavrielatos effectively stated that the NSWTF will do nothing until March 2023 when it will campaign for the Labor Party in the state election. The current government, he complained, had "no desire to deliver what is needed." Therefore, he continued, "We have no choice but to now make our issues an election issue. To take this to marginal seats where this will be

decided in March. We must put pressure on every single candidate to reveal what they will do about the teacher shortages and secure for teachers what we need for the future."

The NSWTF bureaucracy is attempting to redirect the mass anger and hostility to the conditions facing teachers into an election platform for the state Labor party.

Gavrielatos said the union had "made progress" with the Australian Labor Party (ALP), and he promoted opposition leader Chris Minns by saying there is a "written commitment... that workloads will be lower and salaries higher under a Minns government—that's a start."

Such promises from Labor are worthless. The NSW Labor opposition actively supports the Perrottet government. Minns opposes demands by workers for improved conditions, including by rejecting calls from striking nurses for better patient ratios.

Minns maintains that all wage increases must be subject to "productivity-based bargaining," in other words tied to increased workloads. Even in the so-called "written commitment" to teachers, Minns insisted that all negotiations with the NSWTF would be subject to "protecting the NSW budget."

This will be the primary concern of the next state government after the March election, regardless of whether Labor or Liberal wins. The NSW budget deficit has reached \$11.3 billion, with net debt set to exceed \$114 billion by 2025-26 financial year. This is the highest budget deficit of any state after Victoria. Finance capital and big business is insisting on an austerity agenda to return the budget to surplus, with cuts to public spending including cuts to public sector workers' real wages.

In Victoria, the Daniel Andrews Labor government

has overseen this process. He worked closely with the Australian Education Union (AEU) earlier this year to impose a real wage cut on public school teachers. The four-year agreement imposed in the face of massive hostility among teachers and school workers involved a nominal base salary increase of less than 2 percent.

Gavrielatos's public address formed part of a so-called "day of action" called by the NSWTF. Rejecting calls from teachers for strike action, the bureaucracy organised a one hour gathering in front of the IRC building from 7:30 a.m. This only involved between 200–300 teachers—predictably tens of thousands of overworked public-school teachers rejected the union's invitation to join a rally before rushing to their schools before the morning bell.

The NSWTF also encouraged teachers to wear red throughout the day and post photos on social media. This stunt was met with fury from teachers who took to social media to air their anger. One teacher received more than 150 likes on the union's Facebook page for writing, "This 'action' suggests that NSWTF think teachers have spare time before work—exactly the opposite of what we are fighting the government and community to recognise."

Another teacher responded, "I was prepared for real action that will make an impact. This will be a blip on the radar... I am disappointed and disillusioned by the federation this time around. I hope the promise of release time and a paltry wage rise comforts me after this ruling goes through."

The union is sitting on a powder keg. Teachers in NSW, as with their counterparts across the country, face a crumbling public school system, mountains of paperwork, ballooning classroom sizes and a massive teacher shortage. This has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has infected thousands of teachers and students, as educators and their families face every day the prospect of infection, long-term health problems and death.

Notably the pandemic was not mentioned once in the union video. This was by design as the NSWTF has worked closely with the Perrottet government to impose the homicidal "let it rip" agenda, the linchpin of which was the reopening of schools.

After the December 2021 state-wide strike of public teachers, the first in a decade, called by unions out of fear they would be unable to control the mounting

anger below the surface, the NSWTF announced a no strike pledge for Term 1 2022. This gave the Perrottet government free rein to force the return of face-to-face teaching.

This became the pattern of the NSWTF. Following two other limited strikes earlier this year it announced no strike pledges while appealing to the government for good faith bargaining.

This only emboldened Perrottet. While the union has enforced no-strike pledges, the government and the IRC have sought to outlaw any action whatsoever. Yesterday, the NSW Supreme Court ordered the NSWTF to pay fines of \$60,000 for nine breaches of such rulings in April and May. The union admitted to the breaches, and has done nothing to mobilise teachers against this blatant attack on their right to strike.

At the same time, Perrottet has begun an ideological offensive against the public school system in NSW, including a host of reactionary measures such as performance pay for teachers.

These experiences demonstrate that teachers need to take their struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracy. Gavrielatos, who receives in annual salary and benefits of \$254,000, and his fellow affluent bureaucrats do not represent teachers' interests. Rank-and-file committees need to be formed in every school and community, uniting public and private Catholic school educators, as well as the thousands of public sector workers across the state, as well as teachers across the country. The struggle must be directed not only against the Perrottet government, but 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

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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