

Australia: NSW teachers speak out against grueling conditions, government pay cuts

Our reporters
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Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to teachers at a Sydney protest on Wednesday, called by the New South Wales Teachers' Federation (NSWTF).

The event was a pathetic morning rally, involving no industrial action. Of the tens of thousands of public-school teachers in Australia's largest city, only two to three hundred participated.

The protest was preceded by a video from the NSWTF, in which its president Angelo Gavrielatos signalled that the union would do nothing if the pro-business Industrial Relations Commission imposed the real wage cuts demanded by the state Liberal-National Coalition government (see: "Australian teachers' union leader concedes to government wage cutting offensive").

The union is seeking to transform the protracted dispute for a new industrial agreement into an election campaign for a state Labor government, despite Labor having an identical position to the Coalition on the need for pay reductions, budget austerity and the entrenchment of intolerable working conditions.

The WSWs reporters outlined the need for workers to combat the union sell-out plans by forming independent rank-and-file committees, aimed at uniting all teachers and education staff, along with other sections of the working class, in a genuine political and industrial struggle against the bipartisan austerity offensive.

Karen explained: "I teach at a school in western Sydney. We are prepared to battle, prepared to do more. It would be good to unite with other workers like paramedics, nurses, teachers and rail workers. All of us combined would be great.

"Our students at the moment have so many needs, we don't have the support services we require. There are kids with speech issues, with behaviour issues, with

medical issues. We are expected to run an individual program with each child. But there is only one of us in a class of up to 30 kids. We do the best we can but there are just no specialist staff to help.

"We have kids who are so violent, they hit and kick staff every single day. There is nothing we can do about it.

"Then there are all the meetings we attend, the online training we have to do and that's increasing all the time. Every time a new curriculum comes out, you have to start again. And we have no resources given to us. We have to do it all ourselves.

"Previously, we weren't drowning under paperwork and ticking boxes for the sake of the government. Every time we teach something, we are supposed to annotate what changes we made. It would be like a surgeon stopping in the middle of an operation to say 'I've changed the procedure' while the patient is bleeding to death. You have to constantly change how you teach according to the kids' needs. To record everything is crazy.

"The relief we are getting with a new curriculum is absolute rubbish. It is saying 'Look what we are doing to help,' but it is no help at all.

"I spend at least three hours each night working. Weekends it is the same, marking, programming, completing units of work, report writing, data entry."

Another teacher said: "I am here today because teachers are overworked. We simply have too many things to do and not enough time in the day to do it. And the compensation is not adequate. We all love our profession but it is becoming more and more difficult to live and do our best for the children.

"This national day of action is better than nothing but I wish there was more being done. We have had strikes but I don't think it is enough to get the government to

listen. We should be doing more. There are so few people here today because after this, we have to go back to work. We need a proper strike.”

Asked what teachers required, the worker said: “What we need is further relief from face-to-face teaching so that we have time to deliver quality content when we are in the classroom. The number of hours we have in a day is simply not enough to deliver quality education. Also higher pay. I wouldn’t be happy with a 3.5 percent a year pay increase, it doesn’t even come close to meeting inflation.”

The workload pressures were greatly impacting teachers’ lives, he said. “A normal working day for me is waking at 6 a.m. then prepping for work for about an hour, basically doing anything I didn’t get done the night before. I eat something if I have the time and then teach my classes. Head home at 4 p.m., if I am lucky. Then when I am home, prep lessons for the next day. Then after dinner get more stuff ready and maybe have an hour off and go to bed about 11 or 12. Then repeat the next day.

“In the classroom, it can be a struggle sometimes. There are not enough resources, not enough staff, not enough material for the students.”

Tareq said: “Teachers’ salaries are losing their competitiveness. That’s an important issue. Many teachers’ workloads are heavy, and with families trying to manage things, it’s a really difficult time.

“I don’t like strikes because we are missing out on pay. But I would be supportive of it. If you strike three or four days in a year, that’s 2 percent of your income which is basically what the salary rise is.”

Like other unions, the NSWTF does not provide strike pay, despite holding substantial resources, in part from dues extracted from the membership. Asked about this, Tareq said:

“I’ve paid casual membership, like \$12 a week. That’s \$600 a year. Strike pay would for one and a bit days pay my wage. I never even thought of it myself personally. They probably could offer something considering you pay a lot.

“It would be good to receive as an encouragement. Support you back because you’re supporting them every week financially. That adds up. Let’s say there’s 20,000 members. Some of the teachers, like full time employees, are paying over a thousand dollars a year.”

Tareq works as a casual in “quite a few schools” and said that “if you’re a high school teacher and you’re teaching out of a subject area, that’s really, really tough. Many teachers supervise large groups.

“Most casual teachers just want that permanent position. Instead we get temporary contracts and do a good job. Casuals turn up at 7 every day. They should have permanency. They shouldn’t be worried that they’re going to lose their job, that their job could just end.

“Principals make that decision to pull the plug. That happens a lot. And it’s happened to me even this year, even with shortages. I’ve been promised jobs by schools earlier in the year, and then they’ve pulled it away.

“Teachers should not be worried that they don’t have a job or that the rapport that they’ve developed with students will just be thrown out the window. You can’t just throw anybody in a classroom. It takes time.”



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