Australia: NSW TAFE teachers hold one-day statewide strike

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Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers in New South Wales (NSW) joined a 24-hour statewide strike on Wednesday, the first organised by their union in a decade, demanding better pay, conditions and secure work. The stoppage followed limited industrial action during October, including stop-work meetings and work-to-rule bans.

The NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF), which called the strike, is trying to divert the anger of teachers into campaigning for another pro-business state Labor government to be returned to office at the state election due next March.

For months, the union has been negotiating with the current Liberal-National state government for a new enterprise agreement. TAFE teachers are under the public sector wage cap of just 2.53 percent, far below soaring inflation.

Across the state, 64 campuses participated in the strike. There is widespread outrage among TAFE teachers, whose workforce is nearly 80 percent casualised. One teacher told the WSWS she had been working as a casual "for about 15 years… there are people in this building who have been doing the same job for 20 years and they are still casual employees."

As casuals, the teachers receive no holiday pay and have no income over the two-month Christmas break. Most take second casual jobs to make ends meet. Another teacher told the WSWS: "My two casual jobs mean I teach more than a full-time teacher, but I earn about $20,000 a year less."

Over the past decade, the workforce has been halved, according to the NSWTF, from 17,000 in 2012 to 8,197. Like their primary and high school counterparts, TAFE teachers' workloads have exploded, with many teachers deeply concerned that students are not receiving quality education.

A rally was held in front of the Ultimo TAFE campus in Sydney. About 300 teachers were present, coming from Newcastle, Wollongong and the greater Sydney area.

The limited turnout was not due to a lack of resolve by TAFE educators, but the union's isolation of the event. TAFE workers from other campuses told the WSWS they had no idea the event was on. School teachers, covered by the same union, were not informed either.

The NSWTF is openly campaigning for another state Labor government next March. Union president Angelo Gavrielatos, addressing the rally, declared: "Bring on March 25 because the Perrottet government has got to go".

Gavrielatos referred to "disgraceful insecure work" with "77 percent of the workforce in precarious employment." Far from outlining any strategy to fight these intolerable conditions, or address the pay cap, however, he effectively said the union would do nothing until the March 25 election.

This is in line with the union's suppression and diversion of action by school teachers. For a teachers' "day of action" on October 12, the union rejected calls for a statewide strike and instead staged a one-hour gathering at the Industrial Relations Commission before school started, so that teachers could be ferried back to class.

Gavrielatos released a public video on October 12 which declared that the struggle by school teachers, which began in a statewide strike last December, would dissolve into a campaign for Labor. He promoted opposition leader Chris Minns, saying there is a "written commitment… that workloads will be lower and salaries higher under a Minns government—that's a start."

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But Minns has made clear that any wage increase would be tied to "productivity"—code for increased workloads—and would be subject to "protecting the NSW budget."

Minns has worked closely with Premier Dominic Perrottet's government, including by voting against the patient ratios that nurses have been demanding. Minns supported the reopening of face-to-face schooling as an essential part of the homicidal "let it rip" COVID-19 pandemic policy, which has resulted in nearly 13,500 deaths nationally since the beginning of 2022.

Educators have been forced onto the front line of the pandemic, yet at the rally COVID-19 was virtually unmentioned, except in the past tense. This is deliberate. The NSWTF and other trade unions played the central role in enforcing the reopening drive. The NSWTF gave Perrottet a no-strike pledge for Term 1 this year, allowing his government to reopen the schools largely unopposed.

Moreover, Labor has a record. The last TAFE teachers strike, in February 2010, was under the Gillard federal Labor government and the state Labor government of Kristina Keneally. At that time, 3,000 teachers joined a stop work meeting at Sydney's Town Hall—10 times the number at Wednesday's strike rally.

Back then, the NSWTF called for a "negotiated settlement" with Labor even as Keneally's government pressed ahead with sweeping cuts to TAFE and public schools. Labor's "reforms," aimed at reducing spending by $50 million over five years, were estimated to cost 500 jobs.

This was part of the Gillard government's "education revolution," which deepened the pro-business transformation of schools and universities, and boosted privately-run vocational training providers.

The Albanese Labor government's budget last week falsely promised to partially reverse this decade-long assault. As part of its "Skills Plan," Labor pledged $850 million over four years, supposedly to fund 465,000 fee-free TAFE places, but that is a pittance of $1,828 per placement. Only 180,000 places are promised for 2023, provided that the states and territories share the costs 50:50 with the federal government.

Even if any money actually gets to the TAFE campuses, the focus will be on funnelling students into particular vocations to cover labour shortages, as demanded by big business.

The bitter experiences of the past decade show that educators need to take matters into their own hands, outside the grip of the pro-business and pro-Labor union bureaucrats. Rank-and-file committees need to be formed in every TAFE campus, school and university to fight to unite educators, public sector workers and all workers across the country and globally.

Teachers, staff, parents and students are encouraged to contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file network that fights for a socialist perspective, and join the CFPE's joint online public meeting with the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee on November 20.

Titled, "Unite educators and health workers: Oppose the ending of COVID protection measures! Lives before profit!" the meeting will outline a political perspective, including the building of rank-and-file committees, to unify health workers, educators and other sections of workers in the fight for safety, decent wages and conditions, and the elimination of COVID-19. Register now: https://bit.ly/3CRCuOh

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