

# Australia: Striking NSW TAFE educators call for unified action of teachers

Our reporters  
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On Wednesday last week Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers in New South Wales (NSW) held a 24-hour state-wide strike, the first in over a decade. It followed limited industrial action in October.

The strike day included a rally at the Ultimo TAFE campus in Sydney, attended by around 300 teachers, including some from the greater Sydney area, Newcastle and Wollongong.

The NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) is attempting to prevent further industrial action and to divert TAFE teachers' anger over the lack of permanent jobs and poor working conditions into support for the opposition Labor Party in the state election in March 2023. NSWTF president Angelo Gavrielatos said to the rally: "Bring on March 25 because the Perrottet [Liberal] government has got to go."

The timing of this declaration is particularly pernicious as the majority of teachers will be out of work over the December and January period. Nearly 80 percent of the TAFE workforce are casual and are therefore not entitled to any holiday pay when the campuses close over Christmas.

The Socialist Equality Party intervened in the strike, supporting the teachers and raising the need for the formation of rank-and-file committees to expand the struggle.

SEP members also promoted the joint public meeting of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee, to be held on November 20.

Titled, "Unite educators and health workers: Oppose the ending of COVID protection measures! Lives before profit!" the meeting will outline a socialist 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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The WWSW spoke to **Daisy and Sandy** (not their real names), who are History and English teachers at Ultimo TAFE. Daisy has been a casual teacher for 5 years and Sandy for 15 years.

Daisy described working conditions as "a constant hammering of staff to do more work for the same pay. There is constant paperwork, facilities are falling apart, the tech facilities are not available half the time. There is not enough staff, the students are suffering, we are suffering.

"There are people in this building who have been working the same job for 20 years and they are still casual employees. The casualisation of the workforce is insane."

Sandy said that preparation time "is part of our duties because our hourly rate includes some amount of preparation, marking and planning. It is built in. How much is built in? There is no figure and formula."

Daisy added, "Teachers feel an obligation to the students, and they use that against us. There is literally 20 pages of paperwork for each student."

Sandy explained what it means to be a casual TAFE teacher: "We are not casuals who are called in to replace someone who is sick; we are the teacher they rely on to teach the courses. We are like contract employees without a contract."

Daisy added: "We basically work 35 weeks a year with no holiday pay, so at Christmas time we are looking at getting another job for two months. Our last week is November 28 so until February 3 we have no work."

Sandy said she “always had a second job while I worked at TAFE. I’m going to my second job now at the university, also as a casual. My two casual jobs mean I teach more than a full-time teacher, but I earn about \$20,000 a year less.”

Speaking on the unions’ refusal to carry out unified action involving TAFE and public school teachers, Daisy said, “We totally support the school teachers but the NSWTF doesn’t support us. We belong to a different part of the federation. They just take our fees and don’t do anything.”

Sandy added: “They say we are under the federal system which is why we have to go through the protected action. The federation is reluctant to do much because of the fear of being fined: us as individuals and them as an organisation. My feeling is that if there was a mass strike of multiple industries at once, are they really going to be able to get away with fining everyone?”

On the role of the union, Daisy said: “We all know that the Teachers Federation is a slave to the Labor Party. You just have to listen to them. You don’t have to convince me about the ridiculousness of the union. The problem is the union movement is the obvious mechanism for change because it is the only large organisation that recognises the working class.”

Asked what she thought about building rank-and-file committees, Sandy said: “I’m all for something better. I find our union to be very weak. They do sometimes cut through the bureaucratic forest to get some small things done.

“For 25 years I’ve been saying that they need to do something about casualisation and suddenly they realise, when it is at around 80 percent, that it is an existential issue. There will be no union when everyone’s casual,” she said.

The WSWS also spoke to **Nathan** who works at an outreach program to assist young people to get back into education. This includes visiting youth centres, juvenile justice and correctional facilities. He has been working at TAFE for around 20 years.

Nathan joined the rally because “at least two-thirds of my section are part-time. There is one particular lady that has been the backbone of our section. She’s been part-time for 20 years.”

He also spoke about funding cuts, saying: “There was a piece in the ABC [Australian Broadcasting

Corporation] last night about how it costs \$500,000 a year to keep a young person in juvenile justice. Yet, they cut the service we deliver in the juvenile justice centres. Our outreach has also been cut. Basically, there is no more outreach in any of the TAFEs.

“We are seeing more private RTOs [registered training organisations] pop up to compete with us and their standard of education is lower. They are certainly prioritised by the government,” he said.

On the lack of combined action by public school and TAFE teachers, Nathan said: “There seems to be a divide. There is an idea that TAFE teachers aren’t as qualified as school teachers. I was an English teacher before I was a TAFE teacher. I think the government has split us up.

“Maybe it has something to do with the union movement. Maybe the union members need to be looking at some ways to unify different areas. We all need to get together as one unified union. It is something that doesn’t seem to be happening,” he said.

Another **TAFE outreach worker** who is casual and wished to remain anonymous commented on the union’s call for workers to vote Labor: “The Labor party might make a few changes, but I don’t see how they will fix the situation. I’ve become very cynical about everything political over the years.

“Things are getting worse everywhere. Educators have a huge responsibility educating students and it’s not happening, because teachers are just so overworked. We desperately need new teachers, but a lot of people don’t see a future in TAFE because they come in as a casual teacher and may not get offered any work.” The worker said cuts to outreach programs had been “devastating” and had resulted in the loss of specifically designed courses for thousands of students.



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