

Australian industrial court imposes real wage cut on NSW public school teachers, union accepts ruling

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The Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) of New South Wales ruled last Friday in favour of the Liberal-National government's wage-cutting drive against public school teachers, while also opening the door for more intrusive "performance" reviews of teachers, aimed at sacking targeted educators. New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) bureaucrats will dutifully enforce the regressive deal.

The industrial court imposed a two-year Award covering wages and conditions from the start of 2022 to the end of 2023. The judgement involved a nominal pay increase of 0.25 percent backdated from July 1 this year, in addition to the previously paid 2.04 percent, and a 2.53 percent increase for 2023. Another one-off "bonus" equating to 0.25 percent of teachers' salaries, together with higher superannuation contributions, has seen the state government of Premier Dominic Perrottet falsely claim the wage deal amounts to a 6 percent rise over two years.

Even this bogus figure falls far short of the official annual inflation rate of nearly 8 percent that is set to be reached by the end of the year, let alone the far higher actual cost of living in Sydney and New South Wales (NSW).

If the IRC's ruling is permitted to stand, it will mean that public school teachers' standard of living will be substantially cut, coming on top of terrible working conditions and intolerable workloads that have been engineered by successive Labor and Liberal governments.

The NSWTF is flatly refusing to organise any action whatsoever. Its union president, Angelo Gavrielatos (annual salary and benefits of \$254,000), declared after the IRC ruling: "The March election will be a vital test of which party has a plan to address the real causes of the teacher shortages and secure the teachers we need for the future."

Public school teachers are being told to swallow the wage cut, wait, and then in March 2023, campaign for the Labor Party in the state election. There is in fact no substantive difference whatsoever between the Labor and Liberal parties

on the agenda of slashing spending on public education and imposing pedagogically regressive measures in the schools. The union bureaucracy's electoral campaign underscores its role as an active accomplice of the ruling elite.

In Western Australia and Victoria, Labor state governments have recently worked with the teacher unions to impose significant real wage cuts. In Victoria, this involved the Australian Education Union (AEU) ramming through a three-year, below 2 percent nominal annual wage rise agreement in collaboration with the state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews, despite widespread teacher opposition. Federally, the Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has maintained its predecessor's pro-private school funding model while imposing across the board budget cuts and overseeing real wage cuts for workers projected to last at least two years.

The record demonstrates the worthlessness of the Labor Party's promises in NSW to renegotiate the Award in the event it wins the state election. Labor is a pro-business party no less than the Liberals. In the event Labor forms government next year, it will work to heed finance capital's demands for reduced state debt and deficits, including through the undermining of public sector workers' wages and conditions.

The NSWTF's capitulation before the IRC ruling marks the culmination of its year-long, systematic sabotage of any effective resistance within the schools towards the state government's offensive. In December 2021, when the previous industrial agreement expired, the NSWTF organised a one-day strike, the first by state educators in a decade. This was followed by two more one-day stoppages, in May and June, but each was isolated and kept separate from industrial campaigns being waged by public hospital nurses, rail workers, and other public sector workers.

At every stage, the teachers' union bureaucracy worked to subordinate educators to the anti-worker framework of the federal industrial legislation and state IRC regime. By

October, when the IRC hearing on the Award was scheduled, the NSWTF apparatus made clear its surrender before the Perrottet government. It organised a so-called day of action coinciding with the public hearing, which amounted to a brief early-morning demonstration outside the court, hours before the hearing and on teachers' own time, followed by teachers wearing red clothes to school and posting material to social media. This was matched by public statements from union officials making clear, firstly, their expectation that an IRC ruling would deliver the state government everything it was asking, and secondly, that nothing would be done to oppose the degradation of teachers' wages and conditions.

In an apparent attempt to cover over widespread anger among teachers, the NSWTF has not posted anything about the IRC ruling on its Facebook page, the most widely used and consulted social media outlet of the union.

The NSWTF has been equally silent over two other IRC rulings this year, fining the union a total of \$90,000 for the "illegal" 24-hour strikes in December and May and other limited industrial action. The union, which fundamentally agrees with the anti-strike legislation, and which will use the threat of penalties as a pretext to shut down future strikes, accepted these fines without a word to members in order to suppress any call from workers to mobilise in opposition to the industrial courts or the government.

The union apparatus has also said nothing about one important aspect of the IRC ruling on Friday—a change to so-called "performance" review mechanisms. The government successfully applied to make an important change to the Award, with a new clause allowing the Department of Education to "vary the Performance and Development Framework that was jointly developed by the parties [i.e., the government and the union] and/or replace it with one or more new performance and development framework policies, following consultation with the parties."

In its application to the IRC, the government made clear that this ability to "vary" the Performance and Development Framework is directed towards enacting more punitive surveillance measures in classrooms, and facilitate sacking teachers deemed to be "underperforming." The Department's submission complained that, under the existing framework, teachers are allowed to choose a colleague to observe their teaching, as opposed to the principal determining this, and that "the lack of documented feedback on performance can compromise the ability of principals to commence formal performance improvement programs (and their ability to defend performance management processes in unfair dismissal proceedings)."

The IRC's ruling came a few days after the release of a bogus inquiry issued by the NSW Upper House's Education

Committee. Nominally an investigation into the causes of the state's teacher shortage, the report amounted to a rightwing diatribe against the public education system authored by Mark Latham, from the extreme-right One Nation party, and several government parliamentarians. Latham provocatively declared that too many teachers had "barely passed" their own high school certificates and were "not up to scratch," with NSW "paying a hefty price for a schools' industrial system that protects under-performing teachers and puffs up generous working conditions at the expense of professional excellence."

Public school teachers and workers need to mobilise against the Perrottet government by taking matters into their own hands and forming rank-and-file committees in every school and community. These need to prepare industrial action in defiance of antidemocratic anti-strike mechanisms threatened by the IRC and Fair Work Commission, with educators turning out to other sections of the working class confronting similar attacks, above all public sector workers including TAFE teachers who recently took strike action for the first time in a decade, university staff, hospital and health workers, and rail workers.

This is a political struggle, not only against the Perrottet government but the entire political establishment, and aimed at establishing the fundamental social right for all young people to a fully funded, universally accessible public education system with decent wages and conditions for teachers and school workers.

This perspective is advanced by the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), which is co-sponsoring an important public meeting with the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee, "Unite educators and health workers: Oppose the ending of COVID protection measures! Lives before profit!" The meeting is being held online on Sunday, November 20 at 3 p.m. (AEDT)—register now!



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