

Why educators should support the SEP in Australia's NSW state election

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Despite three powerful statewide 24-hour strikes in a year, teachers and other school staff in New South Wales (NSW), like their fellow educators across Australia, still confront intolerable conditions.

After decades of underfunding of public schools by Liberal-National Coalition and Labor-led governments alike, the soaring cost of living and the refusal of governments to protect the population from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have brought the situation to a crisis point.

In public schools, as in public hospitals, there are massive staffing shortages, unbearable workloads, wages falling far behind inflation and not enough resources to provide proper education or healthcare, especially in working-class and regional areas. Passionate and experienced teachers are leaving the profession.

The NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF), however, called off all industrial action and fraudulently claims that pay and conditions will be much better under yet another state Labor government. Likewise, all the public sector trade unions are campaigning for a vote for Labor in the March 25 state election.

The Socialist Equality Party is standing candidates in this election to lay bare the political truth and take forward the fight against the devastation of conditions in education, health and other basic social services, and against the drive to war and “let it rip” COVID policies supported by every other party.

Governments of all stripes say that there is not enough money for decent healthcare and education, but Labor and the Coalition, supported by the Greens, have already committed to spending \$575 billion on the military this decade, with more announcements virtually every week of new weaponry purchases.

The \$575 billion alone would be enough to build nearly 20,000 new secondary schools, or twice as many primary schools. That is why, as we explain in our election statement, we say:

No to War! Lives before profits!

- Tens of billions for education and healthcare, not for militarism and war!

There are no real differences between Labor, the Coalition and the Greens, who prop up Labor governments. All of them

impose the requirements of big business and the banks. In NSW, the Labor opposition of Chris Minns has functioned as a de facto coalition partner of the far-right government headed by Dominic Perrottet, including by refusing to meet the demands of educators for better pay, conditions and resourcing.

Last November, the NSW Industrial Relations Commission ruled on a two-year award for teachers that did nothing to address overwhelming workloads and provided a pay rise of just 2.53 percent per annum, when even the official inflation rate is near 8 percent. The ruling also opened the door for more intrusive “performance” reviews of teachers, aimed at sacking targeted educators.

The NSWTF immediately insisted that teachers could do nothing to oppose the decision and should instead direct their energies to the election of a state Labor government.

Teachers greeted this with a great deal of hostility. Comments on the union’s Facebook page included: “I struck all last year and lost money only to be told by Fed we need a change of government and vote Dom out. Can’t help but feel used in all of this and to have made zero impact on this crisis.”

Despite feigning sympathy for teachers, Minns has refused to put a figure on any pay rise. Instead, he said a Labor government would negotiate a new deal with the NSWTF. But what is the record of Labor and its union partners?

In the past year alone, since the election of the Albanese federal Labor government, the teacher unions have worked with Labor state governments to impose real pay cuts. In Victoria, enormous opposition erupted to the agreement between the Australian Education Union and the Andrews Labor government. There was a record 40 percent vote to reject the deal which imposed a wage rise of less than 2 percent per year. In Western Australia, the State School Teachers Union worked with the McGowan government to ram through a two-year deal for a 2.75 percent annual pay increase.

In its election platform, NSW Labor claims that a Minns government would “end the historic underfunding of public schools” by creating a \$400 million Education Future Fund. That is a fraud. First, no detail is provided to substantiate this fanciful claim.

Second, the annual revenue from such a fund—perhaps \$40 million at most—would be a pittance compared to need. It is

estimated that an extra \$6 billion a year is required nationally to even bring public schools up to 100 percent of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS). As of 2022, NSW public schools were funded at less than 88 percent of the SRS.

Third, the SRS is both fundamentally flawed and inadequate. Introduced by the Gillard federal Labor government's Gonski report in 2011, it ties school funding directly to narrow "teach to the test" NAPLAN (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy) results. This funding regime favours private and wealthier schools, stultifies genuine education and facilitates "performance" indicators used against teachers.

Fourth, NSW Labor says that in partnership with the federal Labor government it will increase public schools to 95 percent of the SRS by 2025. However, last December, led by Labor's federal Education Minister Jason Clare, the country's education ministers decided to extend the current funding agreement until December 2024, so they will not have to increase public school funding until 2025.

Before the 2019 federal election, Labor promised \$14 billion over 10 years for public education but the policy was dropped for the 2022 election. Meanwhile, Labor embraced the former Coalition government's income tax cuts for the wealthy, estimated to cost more than \$250 billion over a decade.

In NSW, Labor was last in office 12 years ago. During that time, it imposed cuts at all levels of education. In 2009, under instructions from the Labor government, the IRC imposed an agreement on TAFE teachers that increased workloads by 20 percent. In 2010, the Labor government unveiled a plan to sell off 100 public schools.

In the same period, the Victorian Labor government put all vocational courses up for tender, forcing the public TAFE colleges to compete with private profiteers, and tripled the fees for a range of TAFE courses.

These attacks on education were enforced by the education unions in both states and driven by the federal Rudd-Gillard Labor government's pro-market "education revolution."

That "education revolution" resulted in a series of reactionary measures—including the NAPLAN rote learning tests and the MySchool website, naming and shaming "poor" schools and pitting teachers against each other. Universities were forced to compete for students, while their funding was savagely cut.

Every Labor "reform" has led to greater privatisation of education. Australia now has one of the most unequal education systems in the world. Figures recently released show that nearly half—46 percent—of high school students attend a non-government school.

As the global economic crisis deepens, Labor and its union partners will enforce the dictates of the financial markets to claw back from the working class, through pay and funding cuts, the hundreds of billions of dollars poured into shoring up businesses during the first two years of the COVID pandemic.

That is why educators need their own organisations of struggle, independent rank-and-file committees. Such

committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, are the only way to defeat the sell-outs of the unions, unite workers across industries and begin an industrial and political counter-offensive.

These committees can unite workers internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. The SEP will provide workers with every political assistance in forming rank-and-file committees, publicising their activities and developing their initiatives.

The fight for high quality public education is a political fight. It requires, above all, a struggle against the capitalist profit system itself.

The SEP advances a socialist program to reorganise society to meet the pressing social needs of the vast majority, not the private profits of the super-rich. Nothing can be solved as long as society's resources, created by the working class, are controlled by a corporate oligarchy. We say:

• Place the banks and the corporations under public ownership and democratic workers' control!

• Hundreds of billions for public education, healthcare and other essential services!

Above all, workers need a new mass party, with a clear socialist perspective based on the lessons of history. That is why we appeal to all educators and students to promote and participate in our campaign and to join the SEP to build this party.

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