

# Australian teachers union strikes sellout deal with Labor government in NSW

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The New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) state council last month accepted a four-year agreement with the state Labor government. The deal is essentially a blank cheque for the government over the next four years, selling out the state's public school teachers.

Teachers themselves have been given no say on the deal. Most teachers would not even be aware of what it contains, relying solely on the union's misleading information. Only the state council members were given access to the agreement before they endorsed it. The 300 or so people at the council meeting, including union bureaucrats, were a small fraction of the state's approximately 56,000 full-time public school teachers.

NSWTF acting president Henry Rajendra claimed it was "an incredible historic agreement" and "the most significant improvement to NSW teachers' wages in decades." That is false, even based on the headline pay rises for the first year, let alone the open door for the government to cut real wages over the following four years.

The first-year pay rise for beginning teachers is 12.15 percent, while those in their second year of teaching it is 20.6 percent, but third year-out teachers only get 4.3 percent and fourth year teachers 8.5 percent. For teachers in their fifth to seventh year of teaching, the pay rises range between 7 percent and 10.5 percent, barely keeping up with the rate of inflation over the past year.

These rises need to be seen in context. Teachers have been subjected to below inflation wages for years, essentially flatlining since 2012, due to a state government wages cap. With the rapid surge in inflation since mid-2020, the nominal wage increases have been substantial real pay cuts. The "historic" increases do not come close to restoring parity for most teachers.

The four-year agreement includes a clause that confines the pay rises in 2024, 2025 and 2026 to the "context" of the Labor government's wage policy, which is yet to be

announced. By signing the agreement, the union bureaucrats have agreed to a four-year ban on taking industrial action as well as agreeing that no claim for pay increases that reflect the changing nature of teachers' work will be made until after October 2027.

In a report to teachers, NSWTF officials said nothing about the four-year deal, claiming they were only considering a variation to the current award. They admitted that there was nothing in the variation on workloads other than a "commitment" to ongoing negotiations on workloads and the "right to disconnect."

Based on what was previously agreed, the new conditions will be negotiated using an "interest-based bargaining approach" that involves unions "engaging with government agencies to identify savings and productivity gains in exchange for pay increases."

At the council meeting there was some opposition to the deal. One senior secondary college representative proposed an amendment to shorten the agreement to the originally proposed one year variation and remove the "no strike" clause. The response from the bureaucracy was hostile. Rajendra yelled out: "How dare you come in here and move something like that amendment. You're not even in the school sector, how dare you?"

The meeting erupted in outrage, with council members shocked by the display of antagonism. Nevertheless, the majority of the council members voted in favour of the four-year deal.

At a press conference following the announcement of the deal, deputy premier and education minister Prue Car made it clear there would be significant cuts to the education budget to pay for the pay rises. Car insisted that the government had budgeted only for a 4.5 percent increase for teachers.

In December 2021, teachers in NSW held a statewide stoppage for the first time in a decade, after being held back by the union for years. This was followed by two

further one-day stoppages in May and June of 2022 against the then Liberal-National government. The strike rallies saw huge turnouts of teachers, motivated by intolerable workloads and poor pay and conditions. In November 2022, the union bureaucracy shut down all strike action, urging teachers to back the election of a state Labor government, asserting that pay and conditions would be better under Labor. This claim has now been exposed as a fraud.

Last month's agreement followed backroom negotiations after the union leadership claimed that the Labor government had reneged on a handshake deal on a one-year variation. The government had put forward a four-year deal that included the 2023 pay variations, but followed by three years of below-inflation 2.5 percent pay increases.

Just six weeks later, the union claimed an historic win for essentially the same agreement that union officials had described as a betrayal! The deal says pay rises in the second, third and fourth years will be in line with the government's pay policy, which may still be 2.5 percent, or even less.

Social media posts by the union do not mention the four-year arrangement, or the concessions that have been made. Of most concern are the unresolved issues of unsustainable workloads and deteriorating conditions which are causing teachers to leave the profession in droves.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the unsafe reopening of schools exacerbated the existing crisis in staffing. Teachers report huge unpaid overtime expectations, excessive administrative responsibilities and inadequate support for dealing with students with additional needs and challenging behaviours.

Throughout the state, there are around 2,000 teacher vacancies. One regional high school in the state's mid-west reported in August that it had 56 full-time positions unfilled. The remaining teachers are forced to fill in the gaps, combining classes, teaching additional classes or using their preparation time supervising hundreds of students in halls or on ovals.

One teacher commented on Facebook: “[B]ut honestly, it's not the pay that's stealing my evenings and weekends, it's the unsustainable, ever-increasing workload. I wish this issue was at the forefront of this campaign.” Another wrote: “Pay is not and has not been the issue for a long time now. Increased job stress, increased paperwork and government oversight ... are all driving teachers out en masse.”

Across Australia, the situation is similar. Labor state governments have worked hand in glove with the teacher unions to impose regressive deals on teachers. In Western Australia and Victoria these deals involved pay rises far below inflation and did nothing to address the real concerns around workloads.

In the same week that the NSWTF announced its deal, teachers in South Australia took strike action demanding that working conditions and workloads be addressed in their new agreement. More than 80 percent of teachers in that state voted for the one-day stoppage, but the unions oppose any united campaign across state borders.

The federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced measures earlier this year that will do nothing to address staffing shortages and only serve to undermine the teaching profession and the public education system. It has also imposed broad budget cuts and is overseeing real wage cuts for public sector workers and those covered by federal awards.

For years the teacher unions have worked to defuse the anger of teachers over their pay and conditions. They have worked to isolate teachers, both from each other and broader sections of workers, who are increasingly calling for action to fight the cutting of pay and conditions.

In order to fight for sustainable workloads, decent wages and high-quality public education, teachers need to build their own organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees and link up with teachers in other states, and broader sections of the working class, including other public sector workers.

We urge teachers to contact the Committee for Public Education today to discuss this perspective and how you can build a rank-and-file committee in your school.

#### Contact us:

**Email:** cfpe.aus@gmail.com

**Facebook:** facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout

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