

Australian state Labor government slashes school budgets

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The Labor government in New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, announced this week that it will cut funding to the state's already resource-starved public schools by \$148 million this year and even more—\$1.4 billion—over four years.

NSW Education Minister Prue Car's announcement highlights the role of federal, state and territory Labor governments in deepening the decades-long cuts to public schools, while boosting the budgets of affluent private schools.

It is another indictment of the education trade union bureaucracy, which has long stifled the opposition of teachers to the increasingly severe under-funding of schools, teacher shortages and onerous workloads, and urged teachers to support the return of Labor governments.

This is particularly stark in NSW. In December 2021 and May and June of 2022, teachers held statewide stoppages for the first time in a decade, after being held back for years by the NSW Teachers Federation. 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 in May 2023, asserting that it would improve pay and conditions.

Instead, the opposite has happened. In a letter to principals on Tuesday afternoon, NSW Education Department secretary Murat Dizdar said school budgets would be reduced by 1.25 percent, and any accumulated unspent discretionary funds would be frozen over the next year.

The cuts are to the School Budget Allocation Report (SBAR), which provides funding for public schools to pay for a range of things such as maintenance, electricity costs and teachers' salaries. These make up

the bulk of school expenses. Disaster and pandemic supplements, which were introduced in 2019, are also to be phased out from the start of term 2 on April 29.

In his letter, Dizdar insisted that the slashed funding reflected declining public school student numbers, which had dropped by nearly 25,000 in the past four years. But the move will only make government schools even less able to match the resources of most religious and private schools, pushing more parents into making a shift and thus accelerating the creeping privatisation of the education system.

Figures released the same day showed that public school enrolments have declined from a peak 810,705 students in 2020, to 786,434 in 2023, despite the rising total number of student enrolments across the state. The proportion of pupils in NSW state schools fell to 62.9 percent last year, the lowest share in two decades of reporting.

Further propelling the shift, public schools are suffering from ongoing and severe teacher shortages. There were about 1,800 vacancies at the start of this term, slightly down from total full-time equivalent vacancies of 1,990 in term 4 of 2023. According to Car herself, that led to 10,000 cancelled classes last year.

Speaking to the media, Car claimed that the government would alleviate the shortages by requiring school principals and deputy principals to teach classes up to three days a week. She tried to present this as a progressive reform by reducing "executive positions" created under the previous Liberal-National Coalition government to ease "the teaching load."

NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) president Henry Rajendra immediately sought to defend the government. He told news.com that NSW's public school system had to evolve after the previous Coalition government's Local School, Local Decisions

policy had “deliberately left schools to fend themselves.”

Others condemned the move, however. The NSW Parents and Citizens Foundation said the cuts would increase the burden on parents, carers and volunteers. NSW Secondary Principals Association president Craig Petersen said the cuts could affect schools planning upgrades to classrooms, playgrounds or other infrastructure.

“It could also affect the number of temporary teachers employed and school learning support officers,” Petersen said, adding that it would leave schools without the resources to compete with private schools.

This is the second major slap in the face to teachers by the Labor government and the NSWTF. Last September, the union struck a deal with Premier Chris Minns’s government under which the union pledged to prevent all industrial action for four years. That was in return for a pay rise in the first year that failed to keep pace with inflation, let alone make up for the stagnation of wages since 2012, due to a government wages cap.

At the time, the NSWTF’s Rajendra falsely declared that the pay rise would “save the profession” by attracting more professionals to the industry, overcoming the teacher shortage.

Teachers still reported huge unpaid overtime expectations, excessive administrative responsibilities and inadequate support for dealing with students with additional needs and challenging behaviours. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the unsafe reopening of schools from 2021 exacerbated the staffing crisis.

These Labor-union betrayals are not confined to NSW. Federal Labor government cuts are exacerbating the squeeze on public schools across the country. In the Albanese government’s May 2023 budget federal funding for government schools grew only 5.7 percent to \$10.8 billion, far below the then 7 percent official inflation rate and the 2 percent annual population growth.

In addition, the National School Resourcing Board’s annual review, recently tabled in federal parliament, showed that government schools lost more than \$2 billion in 2022 because of a provision that allows state and territory governments to spend up to 4 percent of federal public school funding on non-school expenditures.

Under the existing federal-state education funding agreements, state and territory governments can claim expenditures specifically excluded from how the official School Resource Standard (SRS) is measured, including for school transport, capital depreciation, childcare and funding to regulatory bodies.

Federal Education Minister Jason Clare has indicated that this provision will not be reviewed until the next round of funding agreements, scheduled for 2030. As a result, public schools will miss out on about \$13 billion in funding to the end of the decade.

The SRS itself, established by the former federal Coalition’s 2017 “Gonski 2.0” plan, is an inadequate measure of student needs. Even by that standard, however, NSW and the other state Labor governments fund public schools at less than 80 percent of the SRS, with the federal government contributing 20 percent, leaving an annual funding gap of about \$5.3 billion as of 2022.

For years, the NSWTF and the affiliates of the Australian Education Union have worked to defuse the anger of teachers and other education workers over their pay and conditions, and the deepening attack on public education.

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, many of whom who will undoubtedly be outraged by this week’s latest Labor-union stab in the back, to contact the Committee for Public Education, the rank-and-file educators’ network, to discuss how it affects your school and how to fight it.

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