

Australia: Teachers and parents outraged by NSW public school cuts

Erika Zimmer
19 April 2024

Teachers and parents have expressed disgust over the announcement by the New South Wales (NSW) state Labor government that it will cut \$1.48 million from resource-starved public schools this year and \$1.4 billion over four years.

The NSW education department has also frozen school accumulated balances, amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars per school—money put aside for infrastructure projects or to hire additional staff.

A teacher from regional NSW told the WSW: “It feels like the rug has been pulled out from under us. We were told last week that maintenance funding was frozen and repairs would only happen if there was a risk to safety. There is a hole in the plaster in my classroom. It will not be patched in the near future.

“Schools have had their disaster supplement funding stripped away overnight, causing our neighbour school to lose three permanent teaching staff and two teacher’s aides. Our school had three unfilled teacher vacancies that will no longer be advertised.

“We’ve had our infrastructure funding that we were told we had until 2025 to spend, frozen overnight. A nearby school had a plan to extend the library, but that money has gone back to the government.

“Teachers are furious, they feel betrayed by the union who sold us all out. They told us to vote Labor in the election but didn’t call a vote on the salary agreement, or a vote on a four-year strike ban.”

That was a reference to the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) pay agreement with Premier Chris Minns’ government, which effectively gave a green light for funding cuts. Behind the backs of teachers, the union negotiated a deal that included an “interest-based bargaining approach” whereby the union would help the government find ways to identify savings and productivity gains.

In 2021 and 2022, teachers had held three statewide

stoppages to fight intolerable workloads and poor pay and conditions. In November 2022, the NSWTF leaders shut down all strike action, urging teachers to back the election of a state Labor government in May 2023, claiming it would improve pay and conditions.

Instead, Labor has done the opposite.

A teacher from metropolitan Sydney commented: “I suspect there will be cuts to relief teachers and therefore teachers will be expected to do extra [classes]. Also, there would probably be cuts to support for learning difficulties.”

Another teacher posted on social media: “So teachers will be expected to spend more of their own money to make up for shortfalls in school budgets to be able to deliver the curriculum that the state demands.”

Comments on the cuts have been censored on the union’s Facebook page, but over 200 angry parents, educators and members of the general public commented on the *Sydney Morning Herald’s* article on the cuts.

“I am appalled at the news that the NSW Labor government will cut funding to NSW public schools,” one wrote. “It is clear that this government does not see itself as the defender, let alone champion, of public education. What a travesty for the majority of our children who attend public schools.”

An educator wrote: “I have principal colleagues in tears today trying to figure out how to make a few dollars go further. Spending plans have been in place since December and now it’s back to the drawing board again. The goalposts keep changing.”

Replying to this comment, another wrote: “The goal posts are in the same position... the destruction of public education. They are almost there.”

A parent commented: “This is absurd. Nearly all private schools are overfunded by the public and nearly all public schools are underfunded.”

An educator told the media: “[Cutting] funding further

to a sector that is already underrepresented, understaffed, and facing impacts such as outdated infrastructure is going to have longer lasting consequences on schools, teachers, and the students and their families.”

In announcing the cuts, NSW Education Minister Prue Car even tried to present the Labor government as a champion of public education. Principals and deputy principals would be required to teach classes from one to three days a week. This, she claimed, would address the massive teacher shortages in public schools, which have caused the merging or cancelling of 10,000 classes per day, and reverse the declining student enrolments in public schools.

This is a fraud. The cuts will accelerate the decline in enrolments, which began in the 1980s as the result of the deliberate weakening of public schools and the promotion of a “user-pays” education system by Labor and Liberal-National Coalition federal and state governments.

In 2001, the state Labor government of Bob Carr seized upon the reduction in enrolments to close or amalgamate 10 Sydney public schools. Carr’s 10-year premiership saw spending on public education as a proportion of the state budget drop from 25.7 percent to just over 20 percent.

Labor’s next premier, Morris Iemma, took over where Carr left off. Teachers took strike action to oppose his plan to abolish the state-wide staffing system, a system which was underpinned by the conception that resources, including trained and qualified teachers, were distributed equitably by the government across the state.

Individual public schools, increasingly constrained by ever-fewer resources, were made responsible for hiring teachers. Unsurprisingly, this hit schools in working-class areas hardest. A recent *Save our Schools Australia* report found that 34 percent of students enrolled in disadvantaged schools lack sufficient teaching staff, compared with 3 percent in an advantaged school.

The next Labor premiers, Nathan Rees and Kristina Keneally, halved teachers’ sick leave, cut workers’ compensation and streamlined dismissal procedures. In addition, they implemented other cost cutting measures, such as making principals responsible for school maintenance and cleaning contracts.

After Labor was ousted in 2011, Coalition governments for the next decade continued the dismantling of public schools while lavishly funding private schools.

While educators and parents expressed their outrage last week, NSWTF president Henry Rajendra attempted to cover for the funding cut. Rajendra blamed the previous

Coalition government, telling the media: “It is now up to the current state government to rebuild the system by providing the additional permanent staffing and centralised support all public schools need and students deserve.”

Putting principals into classrooms will do nothing to alleviate the staffing shortage crisis. Surveys reveal that more than half of Australian school principals are seriously thinking of quitting their job. Unsustainable workloads, lack of time, teacher shortages, and student and teacher mental health problems are cited as sources of stress. Moreover, deputy principals already have a 50 percent teaching load, with the remaining time spent on ever-increasing administration demands.

These cuts also flow from those being implemented by the federal Labor government. Federal Education Minister Jason Clare is maintaining federal-state education funding agreements under which public schools will lose \$13 billion until the next review scheduled in 2030.

The fight for high-quality public education with decent working conditions and pay for educators can only take place when teachers form their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, and take matters into their own hands. That requires a socialist perspective that rejects the subordination of education and other essential social services to the profit interests of the corporate and financial elite.

We urge educators to contact the Committee for Public Education, the rank-and file network formed by the Socialist Equality Party, to discuss this perspective:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: @CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact