

Australia: New South Wales teachers' union rams through sell-out wages and conditions deal

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A three-year award agreement between the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) and the state Labor government of Chris Minns was rammed through on October 28 in a grossly antidemocratic process.

After lengthy secret backroom discussions with the government, union bureaucrats organised a vote on the deal just over two hours after releasing any information about its implications for the wages and conditions for the 58,000 public school teachers across Australia's most populous state. The full text of the agreement was kept under wraps, with only a one-and-a-half page summary of 19 dot points released prior to the ballot.

This illegitimate and antidemocratic process was organised to suppress any discussion and scrutiny of the terms of the union-government agreement. The deal will exacerbate the crisis wracking the public education system, and further erode the real wages of school workers.

The deal involves a 3 percent, sub-inflationary pay rise annually for the next three years. This goes nowhere near meeting spiralling costs of living prices on groceries, fuel, and rent.

NSWTF president Henry Rajendra (who receives more than a quarter of a million dollars a year) claimed that the pay rise maintained "the historical reset to teacher salaries" attained last year. Rajendra was referring to a deal brokered in 2023 which gave beginning teachers a pay rise of 12.15 percent, teachers in their second year 20.6 percent, third year teachers 4.3 percent, and fourth years 8.5 percent. These pay offers may have been seen as a step forward, but taken in the context of 12 years of previous below inflation pay freezes, did not even come close to restoring parity for the vast majority of educators.

Included in Monday's "offer" was an annual 0.5 percent superannuation increase. This was deliberately misleading, as the super hike was a mandatory requirement for all Australian employers.

An annual \$1,000 taxable one-off cost of living adjustment payment was offered in the event that "inflation exceeds 4.5 percent in the year to the March quarter." This conditional and paltry \$19 per week amount is insufficient to combat ever increasing living costs. For example, in Sydney, households need to earn a staggering \$290,000 annually to afford a mortgage on an average-priced home.

As teachers face another three years of real wage cuts, virtually

nothing was addressed towards teachers' unsustainable workloads. A previously foreshadowed additional two hours' relief from face-to-face (RFF) teaching for embattled primary school teachers was entirely dropped. Currently, even the existing two hours' planning and assessment time is frequently not delivered due to acute staffing shortages.

Educators are being pushed to breaking point. Australian teachers work almost 20 percent longer hours than the OECD average and their workload is intensifying. Increasing administrative, technological and data-based requirements, plus cuts to support services, have resulted in teachers working more than 50 hours a week. Over 70 percent of Australian teachers are planning to leave the profession before retirement.

Enrolments in teaching programs have dropped by 30 percent in NSW, while half of those starting a teaching degree fail to complete it. Twenty percent leave the profession within three years, in addition to a huge cohort of experienced teachers who take early retirement.

In August, the NSW government reported that teacher vacancies across the state's 2,200 schools totalled 1,698. Hardest hit are schools in regional and remote centres, leading to the cancellation of subjects and classes. Many educators are forced to teach outside of their area of expertise. More than one thousand unfilled vacancies continue in regional centres, despite the government offering teachers a \$20,000 bonus to relocate to regional areas.

Public school teachers now struggle to teach classes of over 30 students. They are attempting to deal with an array of complex learning needs, growing violence, mental health issues and behavioural problems, while lacking much-needed support in overcrowded and dilapidated classrooms.

These appalling conditions saw huge turnouts of teachers taking strike action in 2021 and 2022, the first the union had called in ten years. Then, however, in November 2022, the NSWTF called a halt to the industrial action, telling teachers to vote for a state Labor government in order to attain improved pay and conditions.

Incoming Labor state Premier Chris Minns had made clear that even nominal wage increases would be paid for in the form of "productivity gains," i.e., increased exploitation and worsened conditions.

In April, the NSW state government announced it would cut the public school budget by \$1.4 billion over four years, insisting that

the slashed funding reflected declining public school enrolments. The decline in government school enrolments and increases in private school numbers have been deliberately engineered by successive Labor and Liberal federal and state governments, working hand in glove with teacher union bureaucracies. For decades public schools have been underfunded while private schools are handed billions of dollars of public money.

In September, further cuts were announced by the state's education department as it axed hundreds of jobs from the central education support services. Their work subsequently fell back on individual schools.

For its part, the federal Labor Albanese government cut funding in real terms for government schools in its 2023 budget. Funding increased by only 5.7 percent, far below the then inflation rate and 2 percent population growth.

The recommendations revealed on Monday included vague summaries of what the union termed "significant improvements to teachers working conditions."

One was an extra three development days per annum. These pupil-free days are taken up with ever-increasing mandatory online professional learning programs, including First Aid and Mandatory reporting, Anaphylaxis training, Asthma modules and Occupational Health and Safety courses. These, in between staff meetings where teachers are informed of the new levels of compliance, paperwork and datafication they are to meet, dominate most of the development day.

Other conditions adjustments included a "new Award clause recognising the gendered nature of the profession," "Improved data collection and assessment practices" and "Additional entitlements for Family and Domestic Violence Leave and Special Fertility Leave." Such "gains" are largely tokenistic and teachers should be under no illusion that any of them will genuinely ease their workload and conditions.

The stop-work meetings organised across the state on the morning of October 28 were orchestrated to ensure a "yes" vote. To prevent any genuine discussions or debate, teachers were not able to access the union's recommendations until shortly before meetings began. Then, in hundreds of separate venues, teachers listened to a televised broadcast from union executives extolling the deal.

Totally inadequate time was then allowed for questions and debate. Most questions were directed to the claims of workload improvements. Without receiving any clarification from union representatives, teachers were told to put the questions in writing to be sent to the NSWTF executive. A vote on the agreement then took place with teachers having to rush back to school.

Committee for Public Education (CFPE) members attended venues urging teachers to vote against the deal. At one in Sydney's working-class western suburbs, a CFPE member spoke against the recommendation and referred to the undemocratic procedure in which a vote was taking place.

"Nobody here has seen the full agreement, let alone had time to digest the union's recommendations," she explained. "Why weren't the recommendations sent out a week ago? If the deal was any good, they would have been. The secrecy surrounding the voting process reflects the fact that it isn't. The Committee for

Public Education calls for an end to these anti-democratic deals where no informed debate by teachers is possible."

Under those highly restrictive and antidemocratic conditions, the fact that the union secured substantial "yes" votes can hardly be interpreted as a ringing endorsement of the deal. Teachers were compelled to vote on something they had not had an opportunity to scrutinise. And the deal was forced through after two years in which the union bureaucracy has systematically suppressed any struggle by teachers against the increasingly onerous conditions they confront.

This is broader than just in NSW. In the last two years, sell-out agreements have been imposed by teacher unions and Labor led states in Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia leading to a public school system in an ever-deepening crisis. Throughout the NSW state public service, tens of thousands of workers, including nurses and other health staff, are seeing unions ram through sell-out deals.

This underscores the need for teachers and public sector workers to strike out on a new road and take matters into their own hands, independent of the union apparatus.

Educators must organise their own rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by teachers themselves, to discuss and develop a program of action that meets the needs of teachers, not what governments and the unions say is affordable.

This must include a fight to overcome the isolation imposed by the union bureaucracies and bring together teachers nationally. Above all this struggle must be directed against the political establishment, including Labor and the unions, which teachers confront as the chief obstacle in their fight for decent salaries, working conditions and free high-quality public education.

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