Australia: NSW Teachers Federation launches phoney “release time” campaign before state election

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In a bid to head off simmering discontent among teachers, the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) is asking the state Labor government to provide two additional hours—double what they currently receive—of class-free preparation time per week for teachers in public schools.

Last month, NSWTF president Henry Rajendra presented about 16,000 standardised letters from parents and teachers to Prue Car, the deputy premier and education minister, outside the parliament building in Sydney.

This campaign is phoney on many levels. With a state election due by March, it is the latest in a long line of efforts by the trade union leadership to divert the anger of teachers, particularly over oppressive workloads, staffing shortages and falling real wages, into claims that the Labor government can be convinced to change course.

In the first place, the letters are polite pro forma pleas—with the contents uniformly formulated in advance by the union leadership—to Car, supposedly to “bring to your attention” issues of which she is already clearly aware, and responsible for.

Secondly, the title of the campaign—“Two hours to change everything”—is a fraud. Two hours of time each week, by itself, cannot overcome the crisis in the schools. The letters say nothing about the underlying issues of class sizes, work overloads and the 900 unfilled staff vacancies.

Thirdly, the letters refer to the 220,000 students with disabilities enrolled in NSW public schools, but are silent on the federal Labor government’s gutting of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). This will strip support from thousands of children, the majority of them school-aged, and dump them into public classrooms with no corresponding increase in resources, specialist staff or funding.

Finally, the NSWTF is itself equally responsible for the conditions in the schools, having made sellout deals with successive Labor and Liberal-National Coalition governments for decades. In fact, the union dropped its demand for two hours extra preparation time in its 2023-2024 award negotiations with Premier Chris Minns’ government.

Fully aware of the anger among teachers over intolerable workloads, the union officials abandoned that demand without any debate or discussion with teachers, as part of a deliberately secretive and anti-democratic process designed to ram through a sellout deal.

In 2024, Rajendra, who is paid a quarter of a million dollars annually, claimed that agreement with the government was an “historic reset.” In reality, it did nothing to alleviate workloads and delivered a sub-inflationary 3 percent annual pay rise, far below the soaring costs of food, fuel and housing. In Sydney, median house prices are now more than 13 times an average teacher’s salary.

The “two hours release time” demand originated from the NSWTF-commissioned Gallop Inquiry of 2021. The WSWS described that inquiry at the time as “the latest fraud being perpetrated by the NSWTF against teachers and students alike,” and the past five years have only confirmed that verdict.

The inquiry was chaired by Geoff Gallop, a former Labor premier of Western Australia. Its terms of reference excluded the central mechanism of the crisis—the systematic underfunding of public schools, even as governments massively overfunded private schools.

That inquiry found that full-time classroom teachers were averaging 55 hours per week, with 1,250 permanent positions unfilled, and an explosion in mental distress

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among students. But its recommendations, such as an extra two hours preparation time a week, were cosmetic.

It recalled the 2002 Vinson Inquiry, also commissioned by the union, whose paltry recommendations were ignored.

The timing of the "two hours" campaign is not accidental. With an election looming, the NSWTF bureaucrats are trying to head off the mounting disaffection with the Labor government, which the union campaigned to elect in March 2023.

The demand for extra preparation time is a safety valve. It seeks to divert the opposition of teachers into a petition addressed to the Labor government that has imposed these conditions.

The NSWTF apparatus is haunted by the rebellion in the neighbouring state of Victoria, where teachers and support staff this year twice rejected the sellout agreement that the Australian Education Union (AEU) negotiated with the state Labor government.

Then the AEU bureaucracy turned to scare campaigns—invoking threats of Fair Work Commission arbitration and the spectre of a state Liberal or One Nation government—to stampede educators into acceptance of the deal, with only token modifications.

The NSWTF, which is affiliated to the AEU, is also trying to shield the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. The union is promoting the fiction that the two extra hours can be "secured" as a result of the state government's supposed "full funding" agreement with Canberra.

Under the federal-state agreement, the combined contribution to the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) does not reach the supposed 100 percent target until 2034, with most of the funding not even commencing until 2029.

Moreover, the SRS benchmark itself is totally inadequate to the actual need. Established by the Gillard federal Labor government's review by businessman David Gonski in 2011, it was never designed to fund the real cost of educating the growing concentration of disadvantage in public schools. That disadvantage is set to worsen sharply because of the NDIS cuts.

The "two hours" campaign covers up the actual record. Federal and state governments—Labor and Coalition alike—have cut public education funding in real terms for decades, while federal funding for private schools rose by 43.2 percent in real terms per student over the decade to 2023-24.

On top of the $38 billion cut to the NDIS over the next four years, Labor's 2026-27 federal budget slashed the Student Engagement and Wellbeing program from $4 billion to $1 billion, cut disability funding within the Education Department, and decimated the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan, while further pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into military spending in preparation for war.

The record of the NSWTF and AEU bureaucrats confirms that their function is to isolate and stifle educators' struggles and enforce what governments and the financial markets declare "affordable."

The fight by teachers for decent wages and conditions and for high-quality, fully resourced public education can only proceed by breaking out of the trade union straitjacket. New organisations of struggle—rank-and-file committees independent of the unions—are required, guided by an alternative socialist perspective which rejects the subordination of education to the dictates of big business and governments.

These committees need to be formed in every school and workplace, sharing information, formulating demands based on social need rather than corporate profits and war plans. These demands could include an immediate 40 percent wage increase to recover past losses; maximum class sizes of 15 to 20 students; a minimum of eight hours of guaranteed planning time each week; full funding for students with disabilities; and the redirection of billions from military expansion and elite private school subsidies into a free, first-class public education for every child.

Rank-and-file committees can organise unified action with educators and other workers throughout Australia and internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

To discuss these issues and how to form rank-and-file committees, contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators' rank-and-file network.

Contact the CFPE:

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