

Australia: NSW Teachers Federation calls meetings to ram through government deal

Demand the new agreement be circulated immediately! Delay the meetings to December 15!

The Socialist Equality Party
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The New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) is organising stop work meetings on December 8th so that the state's 50,000 public school teachers can vote on a new agreement, which they have had no opportunity to read or discuss.

One can hardly imagine anything more inimical to the elementary norms of democracy.

In the course of a one-hour stop-work meeting, the NSWTF will televise a broadcast to teachers, in relatively small gatherings at hundreds of separate venues across the state. The union will handpick small extracts from the agreement, which is reportedly around 100-pages long, and then allow teachers "up to 30 minutes for debate and voting" before they are required to return to their schools. On the basis of past experience, a much shorter time is likely to be available at the meeting for genuine questions, debate and discussion.

The Department of Education and the NSWTF know what is in the agreement, but the teachers who have to work under its provisions are to be kept in the dark, until the union tells them what it thinks they should know. Only after they have voted will teachers be allowed to read the full document. In an email to its members on November 28, the union urges them to attend the stop-work "to participate in the union's democratic process." How gullible do the union bureaucrats think teachers are?

The union has clearly decided not to organise the many-thousands-strong state-wide regional mass meetings of the past, because it is worried that the palpable hostility of teachers to its pro-market program could rapidly escape its control. Every aspect of the union's arrangements: the total lack of information, the preposterous amount of time allocated for debate and discussion, and the splitting up of teachers at hundreds of separate venues, underscores the class character of the agenda it is trying to impose.

At a NSWTF Council meeting on November 26, president Maurie Mulheron, told delegates the agreement contained a 2.5 per cent salary increase per annum with "all existing working conditions maintained." This is an attempt to pull the wool over teachers' eyes.

The agreement has been reached amid a national assault against public education. Teachers' working conditions have been under sustained attack for more than two decades on a number of fronts, as both the federal and state governments, Labor and Liberal, slash spending to meet corporate demands to minimise budget deficits, and accelerate the drive to privatise public schools.

Teachers need to be clear: the union has not simply *accepted* the financial framework laid down by these governments. The NSWTF bureaucrats have played a leading role in *enforcing* and even *initiating* the regressive measures being implemented against public schools, and against the teachers and students within them.

The union made an identical claim, that "all working-conditions have been retained," in the 2014–2016 salaries agreement. Yet that award introduced a streamlined process for sacking teachers—the misnamed Teacher Improvement Program—which allows the dismissal of "underperforming" teachers in as little as 10 weeks, allows no appeal, and forbids teachers who are hauled into the program to inform their colleagues. The agreement also replaced the long standing incremental pay scale, under which teachers were paid according to their years of experience, with a "standards-based" pay, a veiled step towards making teachers' pay dependent on their students' test results.

In 2016 alone, the Baird Liberal state government has ramped up the toxic effects of NAPLAN through both the *Bump It Up* and *Stronger HSC Standards* initiatives, and reintroduced school inspectors for the first time since the 1970s.

We call on teachers to demand the abolition of these regressive measures as part of the current agreement. Their purpose is to complete the privatisation of public education, a process that is well underway in both the US and UK.

The latest salaries and conditions agreement must specifically eliminate the following measures and conditions:

- **NAPLAN:** a form of high-stakes testing borrowed from the US and UK which, according to a number of studies in Australia and internationally, has already done immense damage to students, parents and teachers alike, and is a mechanism for turning “underperforming” public schools into privately-run institutions or for shutting down public schools altogether.

- ***Bump It Up:*** a massive intensification of standardised testing, aimed at increasing the pressure on both students and teachers.

- ***Stronger HSC Standards:*** requires Year 9 students to achieve a Band 8 in literacy and numeracy to be eligible for the HSC, and therefore tertiary education, once again marginalising the most disadvantaged students.

- **The Teacher Improvement Program (TIP):** a kangaroo court in which teachers are bound by a confidentiality clause to keep silent on the charges made against them. How many teachers have been sacked under this program remains a state secret.

- **Inspectors:** spot checks can be triggered by complaints from parents, a rapid turnover of senior staff or concerns about finances. Inspectors have extraordinary powers to close “underperforming” schools, invoke the TIP, and sack teachers.

- **Performance Development Frameworks:** these are emerging as a top-down directive that teachers must “value-add” i.e., improve standardised test results; failure in a performance review is a trigger for the TIP to be invoked, and thus a sacking with no right to appeal.

- **Local Schools Local Decisions:** an autonomy agenda whose sole purpose is government cost cutting.

- **Temporary teacher contracts.**

As for the paltry 2.5 per cent salary increase, this will do little to offset cost of living increases in electricity, fuel, food and groceries, health and medical costs, as well as skyrocketing house prices, particularly in major cities such as Sydney. Teachers should demand a minimum of double that amount.

Teachers should also demand that the NSWTF immediately posts the full new agreement on the internet or emails it to every teacher, and that genuine mass-meetings be convened on December 15, not on December 8, so that all teachers have the opportunity to be fully apprised of the agreement’s contents *before* they attend the meetings. Only then can a genuine discussion and debate take place.

The NSWTF’s anti-democratic actions and regressive program arise from the fact that, like every other union, it has been transformed into a virtual police force, in this case, acting on behalf of the NSW Education Department. That is why it is impossible for teachers to defend their interests within and through this organisation.

We urge all teachers to take a stand and begin to organise independent rank-and-file committees in all schools, made up of the most self-sacrificing and trusted teachers, to raise these demands as fundamental social rights. Such committees should aim to unite the struggles of teachers, throughout the state, nationally and internationally, with those of other sections of the working class, in the fight for an anti-capitalist and socialist perspective, which aims to end the subordination of social needs—such as a high quality, fully resourced and staffed public education for every child—to the profit interests of the banks and major corporations.



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