

Australia: NSW Teachers Federation pushes through new agreement in anti-democratic meetings

Our reporters

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The New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) rammed through a new Salaries and Conditions agreement, covering thousands of public school teachers across the state, at stop work meetings yesterday morning.

The meetings, which were held in dozens of separate locations, lasted less than an hour. They underscored the NSWTF's contempt for the basic democratic rights of the teachers it falsely claims to represent. Union members were given a one page "heads of agreement" as they entered the meetings, containing five points that supposedly summarised the content of the deal reached, in closed door negotiations, between the union and the Department of Education. NSWTF officials insisted that teachers ratify the agreement, without any opportunity to scrutinise its contents.

In the days preceding the meetings, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) issued two statements demanding that the full agreement be circulated in advance of the vote, and that the stop work meetings be delayed until at least December 15, to allow teachers time to study and discuss its contents of the deal.

An SEP statement on December 5 noted that, "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."

A December 7 SEP statement detailed the complicity of the union in the introduction of a host of new regressive measures targeting public education. These have included greater powers for principals to hire temporary teachers; *Bump It up*, which represents a vast expansion in the hated standardised testing regime; *Stronger HSC Standards*, which excludes "underperforming" students from the HSC; and the reintroduction of school inspectors.

Yesterday's meetings confirmed the SEP's warnings. After being given the agreement, teachers were shown a telecast, featuring NSWTF officials interviewing one another, and making statements.

The union's president, Maurie Mulheron, declared that the deal ensured the "preservation of all working conditions." In other words, all of the previous attacks agreed by the union are carried over into the current agreement.

There are also indications that the new deal contains a further erosion of conditions. The heads of agreement included an

amendment to the Alternative Work Clause "to continue to trial and review pilots on work organisation... to facilitate flexibility in order to respond to increasing student enrollments." This vaguely-worded provision will undoubtedly be used to place the burden of skyrocketing student numbers on teachers who already face substantial time pressures and a serious lack of resources.

Mulheron and the other officials touted the paltry 2.5 percent salary increase as the best that could be secured given the "difficulties faced by the federation," invoking as justification the state and federal governments' pay cap for public sector workers.

In his concluding remarks, Mulheron threatened that if the deal were "not endorsed today" there would be "no salary increase."

The union tied the vote on the heads of agreement to a resolution to wage a "campaign" against the Baird government over its public sector wages cap, funding for the Gonski agreement and "unresolved industrial and professional matters." The resolution committed the union to nothing, and failed to include even a single detail of its so-called "campaign."

The NSWTF's continuing promotion of the "Gonski" funding model as a boon for public education is an utter fraud. The scheme, introduced by the former federal Labor government of Julia Gillard, provides for woefully inadequate increases in funding, the bulk of which have been consigned to the distant future. The Gonski model, named after David Gonski, a prominent businessman and chairman of the Australian Stock Exchange, is aimed at further eroding public education by tying funding to continuous annual "performance reviews."

The union's resolution denounced the state Liberal-National government, but was silent on the central role of successive Labor governments in slashing funding and conditions in public schools. Mulheron and other officials pointed out that their "campaign" would extend to the next state election. In other words, it will be aimed at installing yet another business-union backed Labor government.

In the meeting at Baulkham Hills in Sydney, Erika Laslett, a long-standing teacher and SEP member, challenged the union's anti-democratic proceedings in the limited period allowed for debate. She moved a procedural motion, calling for the agreement to be published in full and the meeting postponed until teachers had been given the time to carefully review it.

Laslett declared that teachers "need to read it line by line given

the union's past betrayals. In the last salaries agreement we were told there had been no concessions. Yet that deal introduced a faster method of sacking teachers under the Teacher Improvement Program and brought in Standards Based Pay with its Professional Development Plans that are turning into top down directives to show improvement in students' test results.

"We never voted on *Bump It Up, Stronger HSC Standards*, or inspectors, but they are now part of our working conditions. They should be abolished forthwith. If we let the union get away with pulling the wool over our eyes again, what will they agree to next?"

The motion was seconded by another teacher, before being voted down. During the discussion period, one teacher raised that the Alternative Work Organisation clause provided the Department with scope to introduce further cuts to conditions.

Another teacher called for a "no" vote, stating, "The union says you have to accept this or it's nothing. The union says our hands are tied." The teacher denounced the union's announcement of an "independent inquiry" into the impact of the state Liberal-National government's "Local Schools, Local Decisions" program, aimed at slashing education costs. The teacher commented, "We've already got plenty of evidence. It's not about evidence, it's about strength."

At another meeting in Ashfield, attended by reporters from the WSWs, a teacher demanded to know why the agreement had not been circulated prior to the meeting. In reply, Anna Uren, the union's women's coordinator, contemptuously stated that this was not necessary because there was "not a lot of detail to work your way through." Revealing the union's real motive—to avoid its manoeuvres with the government from being scrutinised and exposed—Uren said that if the agreement were published "media organisations could make a big deal about it."

Her remarks, and the entire conduct of the meetings, highlighted the role of the NSWTF as an adjunct of the Department of Education, which works to keep teachers in the dark in order to push through ever deeper attacks on their working conditions. The anti-democratic character of the meetings underscored the fact that nothing less than a rebellion by teachers against the union is necessary, even to secure the basic right to information.

A genuine struggle against the unending assault on public education can only proceed through the formation of independent rank and file committees in every school, committed to organising teachers in a political and industrial fight against the accelerating attacks on teachers and students alike, and in defence of the fundamental social right to a high-quality, free public education for all.

A number of teachers spoke to WSWs reporters after the meetings. **Malu**, a 29 year-old first-year teacher, said, "I felt unhappy going out of the meeting. I thought there would be more of a militant atmosphere. I felt demoralised. I felt there'd be more passion.

"I think education should be about empowerment, critical thinking. A lot of the kids at my school are treated like automatons. The lessons are content heavy and there is little scope for kids' general capabilities.

"What you said and your leaflet definitely resonated with me. I

think we weren't given enough time. The union doesn't necessarily represent us. I used to have faith in the union but what you were raising was for me a healthy critique, healthy questioning."

Another teacher, **Greg**, commented, "I don't agree with the union rushing this agreement through. Your request to read the fine print was perfectly reasonable. I'd love to read the fine print. We need to read it because they are bringing in changes we don't know about. How did *Stronger HSC Standards* come in? The union is just saying 'trust us.'"

"I teach art and they are taking kids out of the art classes to teach them literacy and numeracy. The union just accepts things that change our working conditions. I see teachers react to every new attack by rolling their eyes and saying they can't wait to retire."

Paul, a history, geography and economics teacher said, "I'm troubled about the fact we haven't had more information. It's been a very rapid process, a last minute thing. It's been a bit rushed. They've got all our emails, they can email us at any time. It's not like they have a meeting to do that, so I don't know why they haven't."

Paul agreed that the meeting should be postponed, stating, "I absolutely think we need to do that. It seems to me that as a matter of general principle we should not be voting on something that we haven't had adequate time to look over and reflect upon."

At Ashfield, one primary school teacher commented, "There wasn't a lot of information given in the meeting about whether there were any trade-offs in conditions. I don't think the Federation informs its members of everything that's going on.

"It happened to me where teachers on leave without pay before 2012 weren't informed that if they weren't given a job by third term 2013 they had to relinquish their position. The federation didn't inform anyone and thousands of teachers were affected.

"The question about why the agreement wasn't circulated wasn't answered. They just fluffed over that question. Either they don't know themselves or we're being deceived yet again. I've had some time off school, and now, teaching and learning is out the window. It's all about testing and collecting data. I believe now that the union works with the department."



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