

Western Australian teachers describe appalling conditions in public schools

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31 May 2024

After six months of negotiations for a new wages and conditions agreement between the State School Teacher Unions of Western Australia (SSTUWA) and the Cook Labor government, the executive of the union has recommended another sellout deal that is to be put to the membership in a ballot from June 17–July 4. Many teachers have taken to social media, denouncing the deal as a real wage cut that does nothing to address unbearable workloads and the ongoing staffing crisis.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) recently spoke to teachers about conditions in public schools leading many to early retirement and others seeking employment in the private sector.

One teacher, who asked to remain anonymous, said she had been teaching for more than a decade and had experienced worsening conditions in schools over that period.

“When I first started teaching, I had to compete with 50 to 100 people for a job. That is not the situation today with so many leaving the profession,” she said.

Referring to the recent negotiations on wages she continued: “The government and union were previously arguing over wages of 11 percent over three years or 12 percent over two years, and neither of those demands from either the government or the union were enough. Even the fact that we are fighting over one percent is embarrassing. Now, the government is offering 12 percent over three years. I have always supported the unions but now I believe they are ineffectual.

“This is under conditions where the state government has a budget surplus and they refuse to spend any of it on teachers’ wages and public education. It’s disgusting, the money that is being spent on defence literally paying for genocide and wars.

“Last week it was reported in the media about the increase in house prices in Perth, of around 20 percent in the last one to two years. I know of people who because of the increases in cost of living are living in their cars, people with jobs,

who can’t find a new rental after being evicted from their previous one. Rental availability is insane. I don’t know of any young teachers who could afford to buy a house. I know of people whose mortgages have doubled during the interest rates rises and ended up living in someone’s driveway in a caravan.

“The situation on class sizes is terrible. In the last agreement the union accepted class sizes of 32. How are teachers meant to cope? You cannot do it, especially with the expectations placed on teachers, especially with the demands of individual education programs for each student. There are increased social needs, a lack of support and education assistants. People are leaving and there’s no one to fill those places. The whole system is ineffective.

“When a student has been diagnosed with some sort of disability, which is on the increase, they are up against the fact that there is a backlog of kids waiting to see psychiatrists and psychologists, but there are not enough medical professionals.

“We are supposed to have an IEP [Independent Education Program] based on learning needs and disabilities. You are supposed to teach the class and differentiate the kids and assess them individually. In the meantime you are also differentiating behavioural problems, social and emotional problems, welfare problems. So, if you’ve got 32 kids in the class, how are you supposed to teach a proper lesson?

“Some weeks I work about 70 hours, other times a bit less. It depends, but never less than 50 hours. I don’t know any teacher who has never worked through their holiday.

“The staffing crisis is worse in remote schools. They don’t have teachers, you have collapsed classes, teachers teaching out of their area, you have teachers that are not qualified.”

Another teacher who had recently retired described the complex difficulties working in rural and remote communities and the lack of support.

“The salaries are not matched to the workload, stress and endless expectations and the demands on teachers. A bigger issue is the time that is expected of teachers. DOTT [Duties outside Teaching Time] for planning time, reporting,

preparing is completely insufficient. The expectation of work input is beyond realistic. With after school meetings, team meetings, parent meetings, the cycle is continuous and without reprieve,” the teacher explained.

Speaking about class sizes, the largest nationally, he said, “I have taken classes beyond 32 with a trade-off compensation such as one extra DOTT time each term. Having taught in schools that have capped classes at 20 or 25, I argue that this provides a much better understanding of each students’ abilities, increased rapport and infinitely improved ability to target individualised teaching needs and differentiation of curriculum for students.

“When I worked five years in remote schools, I witnessed many, many, teachers start teaching and resign from teaching, on some occasions within days. The environments and expectations are challenging, personal life living in remote and rural towns can be very difficult. The lack of preparedness and then lack of ongoing support for teachers to transition and adjust to life in these communities is not there. University didn’t prepare me for working in Aboriginal communities.

“I resigned from teaching six weeks ago after 25+ years in education. I had taken a couple of years on leave without pay. I returned as a part time 0.4 (2 days) teacher and thought that this would be a wonderful teaching time-frame commitment.

“After only four weeks of doing this role, I found myself in a position of elevated stress that I had never reached in life before. I could write a chapter book on those four weeks in terms of how quickly my journey transformed from absolute eagerness to engage back in teaching, to the miserable head space, nausea and dread simply thinking about turning up to work the next day.”

Another experienced teacher, who has worked in public schools for nearly three decades and has moved to the private sector, said: “I’m now working three days at a private school as a specialist in IT and science, and then the other two days I can work either at private or government schools. I have a really good insight into both sectors. I have spent most of my career in public primary schools teaching many different levels and age groups. I left my job in public schools as the stress levels were getting so high, I literally had a seizure. I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia because of the stress.

“I was working in a semi-rural school, lower socio-economic. There were serious problems with the behaviour of some of the students and a lack of support. We had kids who had been suspended from other schools for difficult behaviours. In my class of 28 I had five students with ADHD that hadn’t been diagnosed, some weren’t medicated students, some with anxiety, others had been

abused with some sort of behavioural issues.

“As a teacher you are constantly going around trying to keep those kids on task. On top of that, teachers are being made to go on to committees after school, as well as the workload of marking all their work, doing their assessments, doing everything else.

“I’m now in a private school; the largest class I have is 25 or 26. Out of 25 kids, I have four students with behavioural issues but I have two assistants that come into the classroom to help those kids. That’s fantastic, totally, totally different.

“Any wage increase that is being negotiated does not compensate for the stress, and the workload. In public schools we are overworked, underpaid and taken completely for granted.

“But the money’s out there. They’re spending too much money on nuclear submarines, money spent on governments who are killing people in other parts of the world. There are billions of dollars coming out of the mining industry that is expanding and growing so much. It’s crazy how much the money the government gains out of this, but not nearly enough is spent on education and health. Education and health should be a top priority.”

We urge teachers to contact the Committee for Public Education.

Contact us:

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