

Australia: NSW teachers discuss latest pay deal and their worsening working conditions

Our reporters
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Last month the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) called a stop-work meeting and rammed through a sell-out below inflation wages and conditions deal which did little or nothing to alleviate teachers intolerable working conditions.

The three-year award, which will affect 58,000 public school teachers in Australia's most populous state, was pushed through after backroom discussions between the union and the state Labor government. In order to suppress opposition, a limited summary of what the union described as "significant improvements in teachers working conditions" was not released by the NSWTF executive until less than two hours before teachers were required to vote.

Discussions on teacher's social media pages have focused on attempts to understand what these "improvements" mean in reality. One teacher condemned the union's "underhandedness" in not presenting its recommendations to members prior to the stop work meeting. If it had, she said, "professionals could have had discussions such as this to come with answers for clarification."

WSWS reporters spoke to a number of NSW public school teachers.

Mia, a high school science teacher working in Sydney's working-class western suburbs said, "A three percent pay rise is not enough, it doesn't cover inflation. There is no recognition that it is getting harder to teach students and there is so much work, you can't get it done. One of the union's 'improvements,' the restriction to one-hour meetings after school hours is just not practical and it's not happening. Teachers have to work after hours just to cope with the workload. The 'flexible working conditions' referred to in the new award are up to school principals to allow or not. I asked if I could go part-time, and my principal said no

because he can't replace me.

"We are already one teacher down, so science classes are being taught by non-science trained teachers. Other classes are not covered, so kids are sent to the playground for supervision. This is impacting students. The constant disruption and changes in staff, different casuals, it disrupts the kids and we have noticed that behaviour is worse.

"Our staffroom has an additional teacher out for two weeks, his lessons, his marking, his report writing is all falling on already overworked staff.

"The NSWTF gave in. They could have fought more for a better deal. They are not in touch with what it's like in the schools.

"The government's plan to address the staffing shortage by bringing people back from head office is not working. They can't cope and many of them are moving to private schools.

"My school is not a difficult school, but young teachers are not coping with kid's behaviour. The school has only one counsellor, 3 days a week, and it's not enough. So teachers have to become counsellors as well but aren't properly trained to do that kind of work."

Liam, a special-needs teacher in Sydney's western suburbs, discussed the inequitable funding arrangements between public and private schools.

"The federal Albanese Labor government, under arrangements currently before parliament, will provide \$24.2 billion to NSW's 970 private schools but only \$14.3 billion to its 2216 public schools, continuing decades of government underfunding to public schools. The teacher union bureaucracies have long stifled teacher opposition to the severe underfunding of public schools urging teachers to support Labor governments.

"After 7 years of teaching, I was going to quit until I

found this school. We have a pretty good culture but that is rare now. I was working 12 hours a day, losing my partner, losing my friends, living from week-to-week on my pay cheque which just covered rent and food. Teaching at public schools is getting harder. I can't see it getting better with the government funding not going to schools that need it."

Asked what difference it would make for public schools if the billions spent on the military and war were instead invested in hiring government schoolteachers, Liam said, "It would change the way schools are run. You could have targeted classes, way smaller class sizes, the kids needing support would actually be able to get the support they need."

Lily, a primary school teacher in a regional school in the state's central west, told the WSWS the amount of time the NSWTF gave teachers to respond to the new award deal was "ridiculous." She said she did not think the new deal would improve conditions for teachers overall.

"Given that money is not the only stressor faced by teachers. Teachers aren't quoting pay as being their main reason for leaving the profession. The psychological wellbeing of teachers needs to be addressed. Many leave due to the abuse they face from students, families and other staff, as well as the mounting administrative tasks beyond their paid work hours, impinging on their private lives."

Lily described the building she currently works in as "falling apart." She added that because of the Minns state Labor government's \$1.4 billion cuts to public school budgets over 4 years, her school would lose 4 teachers.

Referring to inequitable government funding, Lily said, the NSWTF "should have addressed this at the same time as the new award negotiations. The union is currently calling for schools to hold community meetings this term, but it is too late. Staffing has already been allocated for 2025 based on the current budget. This leaves many teachers on contracts out of work. Reduced staffing will contribute to further pressure on remaining teachers. This will cause burnout and psychosocial strain on staff and schools."

Phoebe, a Sydney high school teacher with 14 years' experience, told WSWS she was concerned with the new teacher education requirements.

"Its focus is on teaching education students how to

work out strategies to meet the various learning needs of children, i.e. how to differentiate their teaching and testing so that students can achieve in the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test. Student teachers now have to do this massive analysis of class data for NAPLAN results. They have to target 3 students, explain their differentiation strategies for them, implement a teaching program for at least 4 weeks and then devise an appropriate test at the end and then assess the test.

"I'm not against differentiation, in fact, most teachers do differentiate their teaching, but we don't have time just to shoehorn in another 4 weeks of particular tasks on top of our already crowded day. Already we have a shortage of teachers to supervise these student teachers and having to assist them in carrying out their required tasks just adds to our workload.

"What it means is that student teachers are so focused on this particular task they don't have time to go into classes and observe how experienced teachers manage classes. When they first get into a classroom as beginning teachers, that's the first thing they need, how to manage a class.

"Children need to be engaged if they are to behave in class, that's obvious. But if a student doesn't want to be at school and we have no pathways for them to go elsewhere, and we are cutting all those pathways off, and we have no subjects that students are engaged in because we are narrowing the curriculum, it is not a surprise that we are finding that teachers don't have the skills to manage a classroom."

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