

**AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF
GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS
PRESS RELEASE 917
WHEN THANKS IS NOT ENOUGH:
PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS
TAKEN FORFOR GRANTED.**

During the pandemic, our public education systems and teachers have been considered essential services and essential workers. They have not let our children down, now, or ever. They have educated our children for many generations. They have been an essential cohesive bond in our democratic society and produced well educated and responsible citizens.

In the current crisis, our public school teachers have risen to the occasion magnificently. Parents and grandparents have heaped praise upon their efforts to continue the education of our public school children during lockdown.

Yet our public schools and TAFE colleges are underfunded, our teachers underpaid, and our public school children still treated as worth less than students f in the private sector. The private sector have continued to rort the system openly, in recent months through jobkeeper funding, while public systems go begging.

Public school teachers in NSW have had enough. On Tuesday 7 December they went on strike. They did this despite an Industrial Relations Commission order that they abandon the action. The NSW Teachers Federation, with their President Angelo Gavriolatos have once again led the fight for better conditions and pay for public school teachers. [John Buchanan](#), an academic however, points out that the issues that have led to the current strike have implications, not only for teachers, but for all workers. He lists three basic facts about the current situation:

Jordan Baker's *Herald* article on the weekend (['New battle for teachers pay is an age-old fight'](#)) provides excellent historical context, but the issues in dispute do not affect only teachers. They concern a significant proportion of Australian workers. The teachers' claims are of relevance to all of us.

Fact No. 1 concerns economics: wages are too low. A recent report I co-authored examining teachers' pay found they should receive a 15 per cent increase simply to ensure their pay, relative to other comparable professions, is restored to what it was three decades ago.

Low wage growth has not only been a problem for teachers. For several years the Reserve Bank, along with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have been calling for wages to rise. These bodies have urged employers to share increased prosperity in the form of higher pay.

Striking teachers rally in Sydney in 1988. Today's teachers would need a 15 per cent pay rise to restore them to their wage status threedecades ago alongside comparable professions.

Wages' share of GDP is at historic lows. This not only increases inequality – it retards economic growth, which in turn limits employment growth. A wage increase will benefit not only teachers – it will be good for an economy with stubbornly high levels of unemployment and under-employment. The importance of appropriate wage rises for employment growth was one of the key insights of the work of US-based David Card, a winner of this year's Nobel prize for economics.

Fact No. 2 concerns working time. *Valuing the Teaching Profession*, the report by former West Australian premier [Geoff Gallop](#) and others, comprehensively canvassed the long working hours and work overload affecting teachers. Contrary to popular understanding, teachers do not work 9am to 3pm. His inquiry found many work 55 to 60 hours a week. Again, this is not unique to teachers.

One of the significant changes in work, which researchers such as myself have documented over many years, concerns the duration, insecurity and intensity of work. Part-time work has increased greatly (and often involuntarily and on a casual basis). Full-timers in Australia now work among the longest hours anywhere in the developed world. And work intensification – meaning there is not enough labour for the tasks set – has increased for all.

Fact No. 3 concerns civil liberties: the right to strike. International conventions of the United Nations' International Labour Organisation have long defined this as a human right. This right is recognised in federal and other state labour laws – but not NSW. If we were in Victoria or Queensland, there would be no legal controversy or intimidation of teachers preparing to strike. It is the law in NSW – not the teachers – that is the problem. It is time this anomaly was rectified.

Because the dispute raises concerns that go far beyond the teaching profession, unless they are resolved it can be assumed other workers will follow and there will be strikes in other industries.

DOGS agree with John Buchanan about the broader industrial and social issues thrown into relief by the striking public school teachers of NSW.

However, an even more basic point should be made that if our public systems are permitted to suffer, along with their dwindling band of dedicated teachers then the Australian society is in danger of growing

inequities, social as well as economic breakdown, unrest, violence and authoritarian rulers.

Again the odds imposed by privatisation in the last half century, our public system and our teachers have served our democracy well. We should give priority at this point of our history to looking after them.

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