

The dawn of teacher unionism among NSW public school teachers

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In the early years of the 20th century, growing numbers of teachers began realising that the only path to salary justice was to organise and fight for the right to appear before an independent tribunal.

The first attempt at forming a teachers' union was made in 1911, closely aligned with the NSW Labor Council and some prominent Labor politicians who were former teachers. Its main structural problem was it sought affiliation to both the Labor Council and the Labour Party. *The Sydney Morning Herald* (June 25, 1911) reasoned that the organisers never expected the Labour Party to be out of power and "most of them were sprung from the working classes so there was nothing demeaning in their view for teachers to be affiliated".

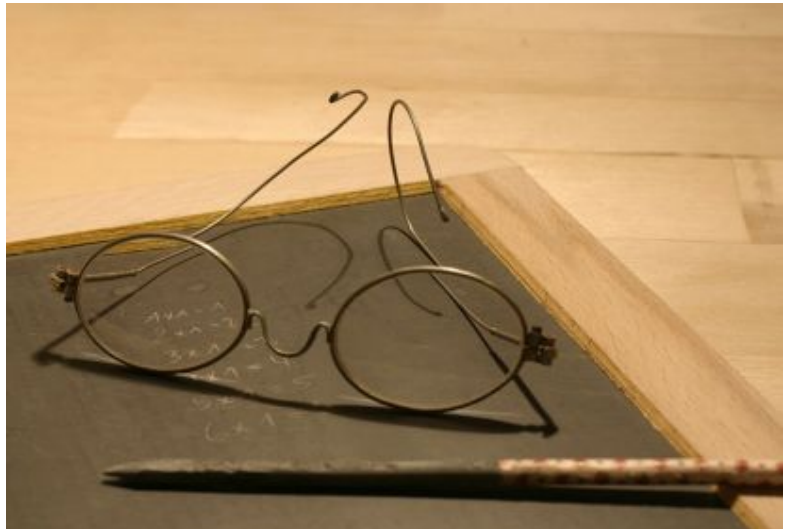
The new union may have started with 50 members but after a successful campaign by the NSW Public School Teachers' Association (which had existed since 1896) to repudiate the concept of unionism, its membership promptly dwindled.

However, there was a lot of dissatisfaction with the NSW Public School Teachers' Association's performance. The organisation was accused of "being dominated by headmasters, of neglecting the interests of assistant teachers (classroom teachers) and being too slow and ineffectual with its 'velvet gloves and notations of respectability'".

Debates between the group trying to form a union and the NSW Public School Teachers' Association were really focused on formal registration as a trade union, so that it could seek an award from the industrial arbitration system; whether it should be affiliated to the Labour Council; and its relationship with the Labour Party.

The facts were not allowed to spoil a good argument, with both sides blurring the arguments. And in the pre-war era the questions of class, the social status of teachers and loyalty to the crown, "arbitration, also associated with trade unions, seemed to be peculiar to manual workers and thus for teachers it would entail unthinkable social degradation" (*The teachers' challenge: professional standards and public service* by Matt Kennett).

It would be almost another decade before the NSW Public School Teachers' Federation (later renamed to the NSW Teachers Federation) became a registered union, with access to the industrial courts and a living wage for teachers.



Teachers stirred to unionise

The war in Flanders and Belgium, with its massive casualties, caused a spirit of unrest and disequilibrium in the social fabric — unrest among teachers not only from an upsurge of trade unionism and socialism but also from their increased confidence in their status.

Teachers responded to every demand the war made upon them, while subject to continued price inflation and falling real wages. While the adult male wage was reduced by 12 per cent, the average teacher lost 30 per cent of their wage during this time. "It was increasingly obvious to teachers that they were receiving less sympathy from governments of all persuasions than militant trade unions. Teachers who trusted in governments were put off with promises." (*The teachers' challenge: professional standards and public service* by Matt Kennett). In the context of war and social unrest, many teachers began to consider how they might gain salary justice for themselves in a chaotic world where governments shirked the obligations they owed to loyal teachers.

By 1916 teachers were abandoning their self-imposed restraint about salaries.

One of the chief factors leading to the formation of the union was the desire of teachers to avail themselves of the machinery provided by the Arbitration Court.

Talks to form a federation of teacher associations began in the mid-1910s. Main parties to the negotiations were the:

- Assistant Teachers Association (formed in 1916, about 1000 members)
- Headmasters Association (formed in 1916, about 100 members)
- Public School Teachers Association (in existence since 1896, about 2000 members).

The assistant teachers were hard negotiators and concerned about a central body cramping sectional interests. Eventually they conceded on that point, indicating their desire to support a united organisation. The constitution eventually adopted meant that associations had to submit to the Council of the Federation on all matters they wanted to take up with educational or political authorities.

All sectional associations would be represented on the Federation's Council but the debate was around in what numbers and how. This point caused major disagreement in negotiations. The assistant teachers' view prevailed, the headmasters conceding in the interests of unity.

The Headmasters' Association, originally not wanting to be swamped by other larger sectional associations, proposed equal representation on Council for Headmasters, Head Mistresses, Men Assistants, Women Assistants and Country Teachers regardless of membership numbers.

The other associations were opposed to equal representation. Finally all agreed they should be represented on Council in proportion to the size of their respective membership.

In 1917, the Annual Conference of the Public School Teachers' Association, which only a few years earlier had rejected talk of arbitration and registration, adopted a "platform" including a plank about arbitration if the government should refuse to appoint an independent board of appeal for which the Association had been asking since 1910. In 1918, nothing happened to allay teachers concerns, frustrations and disappointments when tiny salary increases were given to a few grades of teachers only.

During Easter 1918, Public School Teachers' Association representatives from various parts of the state met to discuss amalgamation of all teacher organisations into a federation that could "speak authoritatively for teachers whenever the necessity arises".

General agreement was reached among all the parties wishing to be part of the union; it was to be a federation of teachers associations, each surrendering its autonomy to the corporate whole. Each member of the agreeing teachers associations would become a member of the NSW Public School Teachers' Federation, on the association's payment of the capitation fee.

A meeting of the NSW Public Schools Teachers' Association in August 1918 called for the Arbitration Act to be amended to bring teachers under its provision. The person who moved the proposition at the mass meeting led opposition against the formation of a teachers' union six years earlier. *The teachers' challenge: professional standards and public service* by Matt Kennett states A.G. Alanson, former President and Secretary of the Public School Teachers' Association, said he was like many men "who had previously had faith in humanity and men to conduct the affairs of Government. He had lost that faith ... He could no longer believe that parliament could do anything but make promises or could ever realise that 'education is the

greatest question in any country' and so 'do its duty to the teachers of this state'." Many at the meeting felt they were at an historic turning point in teacher politics.

Public school teachers unite

Within the month, on 26 September, the NSW Public School Teachers' Federation was formed, when various teacher associations met in a former Irish Protestant hall in Castlereagh Street, Sydney, the temporary home of the Australian Workers' Union.

Teachers' fundamental beliefs were in a state of flux: their assumptions about the benevolence of politicians; their ideas of social status, the idea that education was so important that teachers should not have to behave like other workers. Their delusion that trade unionism and wage fixing by industrial arbitration was linked to Labour politics was abandoned.

A second mass meeting was called two months after the August meeting, one of the first acts of the newly formed NSW Public School Teachers' Federation. Alanson once again moved the main resolution, being that the meeting "expresses its strongest indignation at the failure of the Government to provide adequately for the payment of teachers, and demands immediate consideration of its claims" (*Teachers, education and politics: a history of organisations of public school teachers in New South Wales* by Bruce Mitchell). This was in language rarely heard from teachers at the time.

First Federation Council meeting

The first Council was held on Saturday, 15 March, 1919, and was largely attended.

Delegates from the following associations and branches were represented: Headmasters, Girls' Mistresses, Infants Mistresses, Secondary teachers, Assistant teachers, Men's First Assistants, Women's First Assistants, Commercial teachers, Central commercial Teachers, Hunter River Confederation, Artisan, Needlework, Cookery and the Country Committee.

Disagreements between groups of teachers and their sectional interests did not disappear when Federation formed. The election of the Executive Officers at the first Council meeting on 15 March, 1919, bears witness to this. The first meeting was interpreted by the press as a victory to the Assistant Teachers' Association over the Headmasters' Association, as the newly elected President, Secretary Assistant Secretary and Treasurer all came from the Assistant Teachers' Association.

A.G. Gilchrist defeated Ebenezer Dash (a headmaster), 26 votes to 16 as President.

W.J. Hendry was elected Secretary, defeating Alexander Fraser (Secondary Teachers Association), 34 votes to 26. Hendry remained General Secretary for 25 years.

By the time of the first Annual Conference in December 1919, Federation had a membership of 5600 (having started the year with 2405), and 120 branches and associations.

"The great increase is a matter for congratulations and shows the awakening of teachers to their own interests," the 1920 Annual Report noted. "The total number of teachers in NSW is 8000 and everyone should be a member. The numerous appeals and splendid benefits already gained by the Federation have not been recognised by those standing out, and they will find it hard to justify their actions. Everyone who shares in the benefits is under moral obligation to share in the expenses occurred in obtaining them. The work ahead still calls for united action, but with the support of all, it can be accomplished. The Federation stands for the betterment of the service in the broadest sense."