Hot topics

NSWTF History for Activists


“A divided unity! is a study of the Teachers’ Federation in the post-war period, with particular emphasis on the period from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. The first strikes of New South Wales public schools in 1968 forms the centrepiece of the work, but the book also analyses such issues as the campaign for the federal funding of education, the struggle for equal rights for female teachers and the ever contentious issue of State aid. It also traces the Federation’s often stormy relations with state and federal governments.” – Back cover.


The above Act, passed during the 1930s Depression, “removed women from the State service. There was provision for their re-employment on a temporary basis on grounds of ‘hardship’ but with catastrophic loss of salary and status. The legislation was interpreted by women as a backlash against legal, civic and economic gains of the previous 50 years. Their battle for repeal (achieved in 1947) was led by a coalition between Jessie Street’s United Association of Women and women within the New South Wales Teachers’ Federation.” – p. 59.


“A window falls from a classroom into the playground, water pours in through light fittings, teachers need umbrellas in their staffroom, teachers are transferred without warning. These are some of the challenges Joyce Clarke confronted when she became Principal of Kogarah High School in 1971. Mobilising students, parents, teachers and trade unions, she orchestrated a community campaign which overcame the Department of Education’s neglect.” – Back cover.

The author was awarded NSWTF Life Membership in 1971.
Reader comment – “An inspirational read!” – Catherine Harrison, NSWTF member, 2002.


In the 1960s/early 1970s, Max Graham and Jim Dombroski organised unconventional and militant campaigns, some of which the Federation’s senior officers were uncomfortable with. However, “supported by fellow activists, and overwhelmingly by rank and file teachers, [they] were able to demonstrate that forms of mass action usually associated with blue-collar unionism could also be used effectively by teachers.” – Back cover.
Both Max Graham (in 1972) and Jim Dombroski (in 1973) were awarded Life Membership of the NSWTF. The author Bob Phillips was awarded Life Membership in 1987.

Sam Lewis memorial booklet [by Mel Adams]. NSW Teachers’ Federation, 1976. 331.88 LEW

Sam Lewis was an active Federation member for over half a century, including two periods (1945-1952 and 1964-1967) as the President. This 36-page booklet is neither a biography of the man nor precisely a history. In the words of the author’s Acknowledgments: “It attempts to pass on Sam’s ideas and attitudes to both present and future members of the Federation as the best tribute the Federation can pay.”


Matt Kennett, a former General Secretary of the Teachers Federation (1962-1963), begins this history of public education in NSW in pre-Federation times and continues through to the late 1960s. The author’s wish is to record the history of a movement, so he refrains, as much as possible, from expressing personal opinions and referring to individuals except in relation to matters in which they were involved.

Resources available from the NSW Teachers Federation Library
23-33 Mary St Surry Hills NSW 2010
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"Teachers, education, and politics traces the history of public school teacher organizations in New South Wales from the turn of the last century to the mid-1970s... Dr. Mitchell records how, since the late nineties, two professional bodies, first the Teachers' Association and later the Teachers' Federation, have successively been the mouthpiece of a teaching service in the pursuit of its educational and industrial aims." – Book flap.

Teachers and their times: history and the Teachers Federation by Denis Fitzgerald. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2011. 331.88 FIT

"Teachers and their times charts the extraordinary effect the Teachers Federation has had on the social and political fabric of this country. With a unique insider's perspective, Fitzgerald [President of the Federation, 1995-1997] tells of ASIO spies, secret police files, massive protests, bumbling leaders and dodgy bureaucrats, and explores the idealism and resilience of the Teachers Federation. For decades, politicians and commentators have speculated about this most remarkable trade union. This book, for the first time, reveals how the Teachers Federation thinks, and maps out some possible futures for the union and the nation." – Back cover. Appendix 2 (p. 283-296) lists some of the achievements of the Federation.


This collection of 12 articles, each first published in Education in 1975-1976, highlights the role played by women in a broad range of Federation activities, not only those of special interest to women (such as equal pay).

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