# Australia: Northern Territory teachers resist Labor government's attack on public education

**Katrina Morrison**
**13 November 2008**

Teachers in the Northern Territory (NT) are maintaining their year-long struggle against the local Labor government's attempt to impose a real wage cut and further entrench public school underfunding. After voting down a proposed industrial agreement negotiated between the government and the union in September, teachers are now threatening further industrial action. The standoff in the NT comes as teachers in several states are attempting to defend their wages, conditions, and the public education system as a whole.

In June 2007 the Australian Education Union (AEU) submitted its log of claims, with teachers' demands including: a class size limit of 20 students at senior secondary level and 25 at middle secondary and primary levels; significant improvements in staffing levels so that primary school teachers could have an additional two hours per week in non-contact time; the provision of counsellors and librarians at all schools; a 15 percent pay rise for all teachers over two years.

The year-long industrial campaign involved rolling stoppages, a 24-hour strike, and several mass meetings. On September 1, the government issued an offer that refused to address any of the resourcing issues that had been the focus of the original log of claims. Throughout the dispute, the government cynically maintained that teachers were employed by the Commission of Public Employment, not the Department of Education, and therefore public education funding levels could not be discussed as part of the industrial agreement.

The government offered a 12 percent nominal pay increase over three years. With an official national inflation rate of five percent, and substantially higher annual cost of living increases in necessities such as food, fuel, and housing, the proposed agreement amounted to a real wage cut. With no automatic cost of living pay rises built into it, teachers were being asked to accept a reduction in living standards just as the world economy was sliding into a severe and protracted recession.

A letter from one teacher published in the *Northern Territory News* on September 25 expressed the angry mood in classrooms: "The government has described its pay offer to teachers as fair and generous," Barry Jonsberg wrote. "It is neither. Twelve percent over three years, when inflation is taken into account, is a pay cut. But for teachers, the real issues are resources and class sizes... For nearly 12 months, the government refused to discuss anything other than pay and then neatly managed to portray teachers as being only concerned about money. Once again, the government tries to portray itself as concerned about students while undermining the quality of their education."

Reflecting their hostility to the basic interests of their members and subservience to the Labor leadership, the AEU bureaucracy endorsed the government offer. But in a series of regional union meetings held across the Territory from September 8 to 11, teachers voted it down. Of the 1,200 teachers who voted, 65 percent opposed the proposed agreement. In Darwin, Palmerston, and Tenant Creek, teachers voted strongly against; in Katherine the vote was more evenly split, while in Alice Springs two-thirds of teachers were in favour.

No doubt hoping to avoid becoming entirely discredited, the AEU leadership responded to the vote by announcing on September 15 that three 24-hour strikes would be held from September 23 to 25, unless "significant progress was made before then to resolve the dispute". The AEU appealed to the government to enter a process of mediation in order to avert strike action.

The government instead responded by convening an emergency session of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) on September 20. Invoking the despised WorkChoices legislation introduced by the former federal Liberal/National coalition government of John Howard, the AIRC outlawed any further industrial action for two months. The AEU told teachers that there was no option

© World Socialist Web Site

but to accept the Commission's ruling. The bureaucracy nevertheless successfully appealed the ruling, with the decision overturned by the AIRC full bench on October 28. As a result, the AEU has announced that work bans outside prescribed hours of duty will be reinstated this month.

The NT Education Minister Marion Scrymgour, described the AIRC's about-turn as "disappointing". Negotiations between the government and the union have reportedly since resumed.

The important stand taken by the NT teachers against both the government and the AEU comes amid a growing movement of teachers nationally. On September 12, teachers in Western Australia voted overwhelmingly against an industrial agreement jointly proposed by the state government and AEU. The new minority Liberal government of Colin Barnett has conceded an interim pay rise of six percent while negotiations on a new agreement continue.

In South Australia, teachers launched a half-day strike on October 30, after the state Labor government had unsuccessfully attempted to have the state Industrial Relations Commission ban the threatened industrial action. The government has offered a nominal pay rise of 10.5 percent over three years, again far below the inflation rate. Further industrial action is likely before the end of the school year.

In New South Wales, the state Labor government of Premier Nathan Rees has offered a nominal pay rise of 11 percent over three years and is demanding teachers accept further attacks on their conditions. The response of the teachers' union has been to appeal to the Industrial Relations Commission, not to mount an industrial and political campaign against the government. (See "Australia: NSW Labor's pay offer to teachers foreshadows savage spending cuts")

These developments follow the AEU's betrayal of Victorian teachers earlier this year. There, the union rammed through a three-year agreement that delivered a significant real wage cut with nothing addressing teachers' demands for lower class sizes and more permanent positions. One of the Victorian AEU leadership's threats was that teachers had to swallow the deal because otherwise the state Labor government would invoke WorkChoices and outlaw industrial action. (See "Why Victorian teachers should vote ‘no' to the AEU-Labor government agreement")

In the Northern Territory, as across Australia, the teachers' union has demonstrated its determination to isolate, discourage, and sell out its own members. The AEU has ensured that most teachers in the various states and territories know virtually nothing about the parallel struggles being waged by their colleagues. The primary priority for the union bureaucracy is to prevent the emergence of a movement against the Labor government; so long as its privileges are recognised, the bureaucracy is perfectly satisfied to impose a real wage cut and more onerous classroom conditions on teachers across the country.

In order to successfully advance their demands, teachers must begin to bypass the bureaucratic structures of the AEU by developing other forms of organisation, such as rank-and-file committees of trusted teachers, which can break down the imposed divisions between schools and union sub-branches, and between teachers in various states. Teachers' struggles ought to be linked up with those being waged by increasing numbers of workers in other sectors in defence of their jobs, wages, and conditions.

Prime Minister Rudd has made clear that his so-called "education revolution" is a central component of his drive to increase productivity and bolster the "international competitiveness" of Australian capitalism. Under Labor's plan, public education will be further run down and systematically degraded in favour of the private system. Schools will be closed and amalgamated based on standardised test results, "performance pay" introduced for teachers, and unqualified graduates parachuted into schools on inflated salaries in order to divide teaching staff.

The movement of teachers in the Northern Territory and throughout the country is confronted with the need for a political and industrial counter-offensive against these regressive measures, and the federal and state governments responsible for implementing them. Above all, this requires the development of an independent political movement based on a socialist program, aimed at fulfilling the needs and interests of the vast majority—including a fully resourced, high-quality public education system for all—not at meeting the profit requirements of the wealthy few.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**wsws.org/contact**


© World Socialist Web Site