

Australia: Union tells Queensland teachers to vote for government deal without seeing it

Our correspondent
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In the latest sellout move by Australia's teacher unions, the Queensland Teachers Union (QTU) is urging its members to accept a three-year agreement with the state Labor government that further cuts real wages and does nothing to address the staff shortages, unbearable workloads and the COVID-19 disaster wracking public schools.

To try to stifle debate and opposition, the QTU executive has instructed teachers to vote on the deal with Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk's government via the union's own myQTU portal by July 29. It has not, however, published the agreement so that teachers can see the details.

Even from the misleading union "summary" sent to teachers as a "members' newflash," the deal means keeping wages well below the soaring cost of living, after a near two-year wage freeze by the state Labor government. It also puts off any measures to deal with the acute staffing, workloads and funding crisis until a promised review by the education department, which is not due to report until the end of 2024!

Aware of discontent, the QTU states on its Facebook site: "We know you have many questions; FAQs will be released in the coming days—but the best way to stay informed and find out correct information is by attending a QTU meeting either online or in person."

Rather than contrived "FAQs" and stage-managed events, teachers must have the right to carefully study the actual agreement with the government before voting on it. Judging by the union's scanty "summary," it is another regressive package, like the one recently pushed through by the Australian Education Union with the state Labor government in Victoria.

On wages, the "offer" is an 11 percent rise over the next three years. That is far below the official annual inflation rate of 6 percent in Brisbane, the state capital, let alone the skyrocketing real living costs for working-class households.

These costs—for fuel, food, power, housing and "non-discretionary" spending—are expected to keep accelerating for months, if not years. Global inflation is soaring because of the refusal of governments to suppress COVID and the

impact of the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, on top of the pouring of trillions of dollars into the money markets by governments and central banks since 2008.

Despite this cost of living crisis, the 11 percent increase—4 percent this year, 4 percent next year and 3 percent the following year—keeps the overall figure within the 3.5 percent annual limit demanded last month by Reserve Bank of Australia's Philip Lowe, backed by the federal Labor government. That is about half the 7 percent inflation forecast by Lowe before the end of the year.

The QTU-government deal points to the wider role of the trade unions in seeking to police the real wage-cutting agenda of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government and the corporate ruling class.

According to the QTU "summary," the effective wage cut will be moderated by a "cost of living adjustment." Each year, if the official annual Brisbane Consumer Price Index exceeds the wage increase, a one-off top-up will be paid, "up to 3 percent." But even that lump sum will be delayed until the end of that year of the agreement.

Paying lip service to the dire teacher shortage, the QTU "summary" outlines various, mostly unspecified, "enhancements to attraction and retention initiatives, including changes for specific regional, rural and remote locations." These will do little to alleviate the crisis. A Queensland Secondary Principals' Association survey earlier this year found that 80 percent of schools across the state have teacher vacancies, and no schools in central Queensland are fully staffed.

Last month's state budget said only 675 new teachers would be hired in 2022-23, not enough to cover enrolment increases. The government claimed it would still meet its 2020 state election commitment to provide "6,190 new teachers" over four years, but there were no new measures in the budget to address the shortages.

The QTU announcement is silent on the worsening COVID toll. More than a million people in Queensland have contracted COVID-19 in the past six months. During the

first Omicron wave at the start of the year, between 1,000 and 1,500 school-aged children were infected per day.

Since then, the union has helped the government drop the mask mandate, stall on ventilation audits and fail to provide air filters to classrooms. That is in line with the union's collaboration with the government in pushing students and teachers back into unsafe classrooms this year.

The QTU is attempting to browbeat teachers into accepting this betrayal. Having not called any industrial action for years, it warns that if teachers vote no, the offer would be withdrawn. "This could then lead to a protracted industrial campaign with the potential for the government to seek the assistance of the QIRC [state industrial court] through arbitration of salaries and initiatives."

Paul, a veteran Brisbane teacher, said the "offer" showed that the Labor government's contempt for teachers and public education was no different to that of the Liberal-National Coalition and far-right elements.

He told the WSWS: "The fact is that the current pay offer is inadequate in terms of the current level of inflation, the cost of living, falsely blamed on external factors such as the imperialist war in Ukraine and the impending hike in interest rates... forcing new home buyers—who bought into an artificially inflated market—inexorably towards a mortgage cliff.

"Indeed, the inadequacy of the Queensland Labor government's pay offer to teachers is a reflection of the failure of capitalism overall to provide for anyone other than the ruling class, who have prospered with obscene levels of profit during an ongoing pandemic. This has not only served to intentionally impoverish the majority of the world's population, but by its effects has perpetuated education as a tool of the capitalist state and teachers' lives as fundamentally dispensable and subservient to the status quo."

Paul commented: "As we enter the second semester of the third year of COVID disruption, it's important to take into consideration the effect this has had on the sphere of education as a whole. There is no doubt that this disruption has had a profoundly negative effect on students, their outcomes and their experience of school generally. This has been widely reported and so it should, though media analysis has been—conveniently—very short on the effects this has had on teachers' lives."

The QTU's deal with the government is part of a wider drive by the education and other trade unions to isolate workers from each other, state by state and workplace by workplace, and shut down opposition to the austerity offensive being spearheaded by the state, territory and federal Labor governments.

Last month, the Queensland Council of Unions called off a

budget day protest by workers outside the state parliament, despite the budget containing an annual public sector wage rise cap of 2.5 percent and providing no relief for intolerable workloads, even after posting a \$1.9 billion surplus in 2021-22 due to surging world prices for coal, the state's biggest export revenue source.

With 24 public service workplace agreements expiring this year, including for nurses, teachers, police, firefighters, doctors and paramedics, Labor and its union partners are intent on blocking strikes and keeping pay rises well below inflation.

Queensland's union apparatuses are cutting off their members from the strikes of teachers, nurses, rail workers and public servants in neighbouring New South Wales (NSW), who face similar attacks by that state's Liberal-National government, as well as a global eruption of workers' struggles against the devastating surge in the cost of living.

The unions' role is to quash any threat to the political establishment or corporate profits. To break out of this straitjacket, workers need to form rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions, to take up a unified struggle for real wage increases and decent, safe conditions for all.

What is needed is a socialist perspective. Fully-funded, high quality education systems, with decent pay and conditions for all workers, require nothing less than the reorganisation of society to meet social needs, not the profit interests of the financial elite.

The Socialist Equality Party has initiated the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) to lead the fight by teachers for this perspective. We urge educators to contact the CFPE today.

Committee for Public Education

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