

Australia: Opposition grows among Queensland teachers to union deal with state Labor government

Our correspondent
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Contrary to misleading reports in the Murdoch media and other corporate outlets, teachers in the Australian state of Queensland have not accepted an agreement struck by the Queensland Teachers Union (QTU) with the state Labor government.

According to the Brisbane *Courier-Mail*, teachers have scored a “massive wages win.” 7News reported: “Queensland teachers lock in pay rise.” The *Australian* maliciously accused Queensland teachers of “cashing in” with a “cost-of-living bonus.” Sky News claimed: “Queensland teachers are becoming the best-paid school educators in Australia after striking an agreement with the Palaszczuk government.”

In fact, with a union-controlled ballot open until July 29, opposition is developing to the enterprise bargaining deal, above all because it does nothing to address the staff shortages, unbearable workloads and COVID-19 disaster wracking public schools.

Despite the widespread anger among teachers over these conditions, the three-year agreement with Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk’s government actually puts off any possible answer to the staffing, workloads and funding crisis until a promised departmental review report due at the end of 2024—more than two years away!

Teachers who oppose the agreement and the union’s rush to push through a ballot have reported being blocked by principals from voicing their concerns. Acutely aware of disaffection, the QTU is dispatching its officials to schools to supposedly clarify the agreement.

A teacher who spoke to the WSWS had told his colleagues at his school had voted no, and he hoped others would do the same. “People are asking more questions now about the agreement, and that’s good. This is not just about wages; it’s about conditions.

“There is a serious teacher shortage in Brisbane and it is

even worse in the regional areas. Teachers are working six days a week. The expectations for reporting are ridiculous. The government just wants the data to look good.”

He denounced the “misinformation” in the media, which is designed to get teachers to think that the deal is a fait accompli. “And what about reporting the government’s billion-dollar surplus?” he asked.

This sentiment is widely shared among teachers and other school staff. There is deep hostility to the QTU deal’s lack of any improvement after years of mounting workloads and the resulting resignations of teachers and staff shortages. Longstanding teachers say that the size and complexity of workloads have increased astronomically.

Far from the witch-hunting media headlines about teachers winning big pay rises, the QTU agreement maintains the intolerable conditions in the schools, which are being made worse every day by the spread of the highly-transmissible Omicron BA.4 and BA.5 sub-variants through the ranks of staff and students alike, thanks to the government’s profit-driven school reopening, backed by the QTU.

The agreement also continues to cut real wages after Palaszczuk’s government imposed a near two-year wage freeze when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020.

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.

Significantly, the 11 percent increase is just at the 3.5 percent annual limit demanded last month by Reserve Bank of Australia 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.

According to a 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.

Concerned about dissent, QTU general secretary Kate Ruttiman sent a July 20 email to all members trying to dress up the promised departmental review of teachers’ duties as a “positive step to address workload creep.”

Ruttiman also claimed that the government’s offer contained clauses that provide additional release time for “some members,” “clarify duties,” “encourage members to disconnect” after hours and “incorporate fatigue management strategies.” She insisted these were all “important steps to addressing workload and wellbeing.”

But the main thrust of the email was to step up the union’s efforts to browbeat its members into voting for the offer by threatening them with even worse outcomes if they rejected it.

Displaying contempt for any democratic decision by the members, Ruttiman declared that if they voted “no,” any ensuing industrial campaign or arbitrated outcome would be confined to a bargaining claim endorsed by members in November 2021, long before the inflationary spiral took off.

Cynically, Ruttiman said any new claims would not have been “determined by our democratic processes.” That rules out, in advance, any right of members to demand decent pay and conditions if they reject the union’s deal.

The QTU boss also warned members to “be alert for misinformation,” that is, any information not provided by the union itself. That appears to be a reference to the WSW, which has provided the only exposure of the deal, based on the opposition expressed by members themselves.

A July 20 editorial in the *Australian*, accompanying its misleading report, accused Queensland public sector unions of “fuelling inflation.” That is doubly false.

First, workers’ wages, which have fallen in real terms over the past decade, are obviously not the cause of inflation. The cost-of-living crisis is the result of governments and central banks pouring trillions of dollars into the financial markets, the disruption of global supply chains because of the unchecked pandemic and the worldwide impact of the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine on fuel and food prices.

Second, the unions in Queensland and nationally are trying to keep wage rises below 3.5 percent a year in order to police the austerity agenda of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s federal Labor government and the corporate ruling class.

But the editorial displays the alarm in ruling circles that the unions will not be able to contain workers’ demands for pay increases to cope with the skyrocketing prices for essentials such as petrol, food, energy and housing. Even the rises offered to teachers would, the editorial warned, “add to the risk of wages breakouts,” including by “ambulance officers, firefighters, hospital workers, paramedics and administrators.”

By cutting deals with the state Labor government, the QTU and other unions in Queensland are seeking to separate 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 Coalition government.

Amid a global eruption of workers’ struggles against the devastating surge in the cost of living, the QTU is also isolating teachers from their colleagues in Victoria who are continuing to oppose the regressive wage-cutting agreement recently imposed by the Australian Education Union.

Everywhere, the unions’ role is to stifle any unified threat to corporate profits and the political establishment, whether led by Labor or the Coalition. To fight for real wage increases and decent, safe conditions for all, workers need to form rank-and-file committees, totally independent of the unions.

Fully-funded, high quality public education systems, with decent pay and conditions for all staff, require the complete reorganisation of society to meet social needs, not the profit interests of the ruling class. The SEP has initiated the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) to lead the fight by teachers for this socialist perspective. We urge educators to contact the CFPE today.

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

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