Australian state Labor governments threaten school teachers over Palestine solidarity actions

Patrick O'Connor
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Demonstrating their utter contempt for democratic rights, Labor governments in the Australian states of Victoria and New South Wales have threatened public school teachers with disciplinary action if they express in their workplaces any solidarity with the Palestinian people.

The Labor governments, their Departments of Education, Zionist organisations and the corporate media have worked together to whip up a frenzied atmosphere of intimidation, including through false allegations of antisemitism.

On November 27, the Victorian Labor government's deputy premier and education minister Ben Carroll organised a press conference to issue provocative threats against teachers. The pretext for this was the organisation by a group of teachers of a "week of action," involving limited initiatives such as wearing kufiyahs and Palestine flag pins to schools.

Carroll thundered: "This action is divisive and inflammatory and I condemn it. We do not support this action, we do not support this flyer [promoting the week of action], and we're asking teachers to teach the curriculum." He invoked a government code of conduct. In response to a question as to whether teachers would be sacked, he said: "We are hoping we don't have to get to that, but there are a range of actions in terms of reprimand."

The government's threat was relayed later that day by Department of Education deputy secretary David Howes, who sent an email to public school teachers, "reminding" them of "obligations under the Victorian Public Sector Code of Conduct and the Victorian Institute of Teaching's Code of Conduct." He directly warned against any participation in the "week of action."

This represented a thinly-veiled threat to end teachers' careers. The Victorian Institute of Teaching can revoke teachers' registrations, making it impossible to work in any school.

Howes said teachers "should not use their privileged position in the classroom and the school community to advocate particular views on political topics." He added: "While staff have the right to freedom of expression, this is subject to lawful restrictions such as protecting public order."

These positions are grossly hypocritical. Within schools, teachers are frequently encouraged to advocate "particular views on political topics"—when these views and topics are right-wing and pro-establishment, such as the promotion of Anzac Day militarism.

The edict against any discussion of Israeli war crimes in Gaza and the occupied West Bank came amid several reports of teachers being wrongly disciplined within schools.

At a vigil event organised in central Melbourne last week by the Teachers and School Staff For Palestine group, Louisa, a maths and science teacher with 15 years' experience, explained: "I was sent home from work for handing out flyers to my colleagues. The flyers promoted a week of action, where we visibly show our support for the people of Palestine."

She explained that discussion within the classroom, "allows students to find common ground with each other, to better understand and empathise with each other, and ultimately to see the humanity in each other.

"It should be concerning that this is not allowed to happen in our classrooms with respect to Palestine and Israel. We need to be able to support our students to do this because we cannot leave them to only have these conversations on social media or in the schoolyard. This will further polarise them, and that is harmful to our school communities."

Teachers and School Staff For Palestine, within which members of pseudo-left organisations are active, have organised various such protest actions while promoting the illusion that passing resolutions at union branch and regional meetings, and organising school protests, will pressure the Australian Education Union (AEU) leadership to oppose the atrocities in Gaza.

Pseudo-left organisations such as Solidarity aim to contain

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teachers' outrage within the framework of the political establishment and trade unionism—covering up the union bureaucracy's complicity in what is taking place.

At different events, the Greens have been promoted as means through which to pressure the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. The entire Australian parliamentary establishment is in reality working in lockstep with US imperialism. This includes active complicity in the genocidal onslaught in Gaza. Military assistance and intelligence gathered via the US-Australian Pine Gap base, near Alice Springs, Northern Territory, is playing an important role in operations against the Palestinian people.

The state Labor government in New South Wales (NSW) soon joined its Victorian counterpart in threatening teachers. On November 30, deputy premier and education minister Prue Car declared in state parliament that teachers displaying pro-Palestinian posters or banners in schools was "inappropriate." She said: "People will be dealt with in accordance with the code of conduct if they breach it."

The Labor governments' denunciations of teachers were coordinated with an ongoing media propaganda blitz.

The Murdoch-owned *Herald Sun* in Melbourne published a cartoon portraying a classroom teacher as a terrorist. Every major outlet published without criticism the inflammatory and defamatory comments on the "week of action" in Victoria by Dvir Abramovich, chairman of the Anti-Defamation Commission, who said: "This is a declaration of war against Jewish students and the Jewish community."

The public campaign against teachers immediately followed the political and media establishment's denunciation of school student strikes and protests held November 23-24.

The *World Socialist Web Site* noted last month: "The venomous response of the establishment to the protests was as significant as the events themselves. There is no recent parallel to relatively small political events of young people being attacked as stridently and aggressively as over the past few days. It is an extraordinary condemnation of official society and its institutions that youth had to fight for their right to protest the mass murder of infants and children in Gaza, more than 5,500 of whom have been slaughtered over the past six weeks."

The latest attacks on the democratic rights of public school workers, have been facilitated by the AEU bureaucracy, which said nothing as governments threatened sackings and disciplinary measures.

When Carroll issued his warning to teachers, he explained that he had earlier spoken on the telephone with AEU state president Meredith Peace (annual salary and benefits $247,000). Carroll said Peace assured him that the union did not support any Palestine solidarity actions.

Three days later, Peace emailed teacher reps in school sub-branches, writing: "The AEU has not endorsed members participating in specific school-based advocacy activities in relation to the conflict."

Peace added: "The codes of conduct do not prevent AEU members from discussing and advancing views about issues that are the subject of community debate. When engaging in legitimate workplace discussions with colleagues about the conflict in Palestine, members are advised to do so in a respectful way that takes into account the heightened tensions and strength of feeling some may have in relation to the issues."

The union chief addressed neither Carroll's public statements nor the associated media frenzy, let alone condemned them. Nor was there any commitment to defend any teacher victimised as a result of allegations associated with Palestine.

These silences form part of the Australian trade union apparatuses' complicity in the ongoing Israeli assault on Gaza. The union bureaucrats remain the loyal partner of the Labor Party, at the federal and state levels, which is providing active support for the murderous war against the Palestinian people. The Maritime Union of Australia, which is in a position to heed Palestinian union calls for a blockade of military shipments to Israel, has done nothing to actually stop such ships.

Workers in every sector need to develop internationally unified solidarity actions with Palestine, including preparing for political general strikes to stop the genocide.

This can develop only through the building of rank-and-file committees in every workplace, independent of the union apparatuses. Within the schools and education sector, the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) has alone advanced this perspective. CFPE members have moved resolutions in schools and teachers' union meetings opposing the onslaught against the Palestinian people and defending the rights of all teachers engaged in solidarity actions, opposing the anti-democratic government threats against school workers.

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