

Australia: Queensland teachers in arbitration straitjacket, facing long pay freeze

Mike Head
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The Committee for Public Education is holding an online public meeting on Sunday June 14 at 11 a.m. AEST, titled “Vote No to AEU-Labor sellout! Build independent rank-and-file committees! Fund education not war!” We urge educators and other workers, in Victoria, throughout the country and globally, to attend. Click here to register.

Despite two widely-supported 24-hour strikes last August and November against low pay and crushing workloads, public school teachers in the Australian state of Queensland have been locked by the state government and the Queensland Teachers Union (QTU) into an arbitration process that will not be completed until 2027.

Last year’s stoppages—the first in 16 years—saw tens of thousands of teachers and their supporters participate in rallies and marches across the state, voicing their determination to fight years of below-inflation wage rises, growing work burdens, oversized classes, burnout, inadequate resources and worsening staffing shortages.

What has happened in Queensland since is a warning to school teachers and support staff everywhere about the role of the Australian Education Union (AEU) apparatus and its state affiliates, such as the QTU, in dividing and suppressing their struggles against these conditions, which exist throughout Australia.

It underscores the necessity for educators in the state of Victoria to reject the latest agreement proposed by the AEU to impose another pay-cutting deal that would retain intolerable workloads for the next four years after similar powerful strike action.

Teachers in Queensland voted for a “series of 24-hour strikes” at mass rallies during their first strike on August 6, only to have the QTU delay further action. In October, teachers voted by nearly 68 percent in a ballot to reject the right-wing Liberal National Party (LNP) state government’s “best and final” offer, which the QTU leaders had fatuously described as an “improved offer.”

After reluctantly calling a second statewide stoppage in November to head off teachers’ discontent, the QTU leadership shut down further industrial action. It effectively joined hands with the LNP government to refer the dispute, as of December 31, to compulsory arbitration by the government’s pro-

employer Queensland Industrial Relations Commission (QIRC).

That QIRC regime outlaws further stoppages. It is set to impose deeper real wage cuts and continued poor conditions via a binding ruling after lengthy hearings that will not even commence before this October.

In the meantime, teachers have not had a pay rise since July 2024. And that last nominal increase in 2024 left teachers at least 6.5 percent behind inflation after an earlier 18-month pay freeze by the previous state Labor government when the COVID pandemic first broke out.

For months this year, the QTU has told its members via occasional bulletins and videos that “the arbitration progress is strong,” key working conditions have been “secured” and that an interim 3 percent pay rise would be soon obtained. None of this was ever true.

The latest QTU “newsflash” to its members on May 25 was met with a combination of disbelief and disaffection by teachers on social media. It announced that the union would submit an “evidence-based” case, “backed by independent economic analysis,” to the QIRC for a 24 percent pay rise over the next four years, starting with just 3 percent this year, and 7 percent in each of the following three years.

The QTU ludicrously claimed that this meant “restoring wages that have fallen behind, keeping Queensland salaries competitive, and recognising the growing complexity of our work.”

Led by QTU acting general secretary Brendan Crotty, the union bureaucrats also insisted that the QTU “is fighting to protect and improve non-salary conditions” yet admitted that the arbitration “places current hard-won conditions—such as class sizes, non-contact hours, and rural incentives—under review by the commission.”

Even on the QTU’s censored Facebook site, remarks by members were caustic. “It seems like there is no backpay in the agreement and no real rise till 2027/8,” one objected. “This does not seem right given no pay rise since 2024.”

Another wrote: “This is not the outcome that teachers hoped for, and not the ‘fair’ outcome that the QTU is espousing.” A teacher commented: “Still not enough. Until they address work conditions no number is going to be enough.” Concerns were

raised that teacher aides “will be lucky to get 10% and already in a low income.”

An “anonymous member” wrote: “The last teacher award ended a year ago—no back pay when all the court battles are finally done. The teachers’ union says possibly in 2027. How does that make you feel after a hard day’s teaching? I can tell you for free, it makes me feel very cheap.”

Some outraged comments were posted on Reddit. “We went on strike what, twice? The QTU are too comfortable in their ivory towers to bother taking any risks for us,” one stated. “QTU massively dropped the ball here.” Another said: “I feel betrayed in a way I can’t describe. This deal is less than CPI, we have been at less than CPI since 2019. This locks us in for a decade that is nothing but pay cuts. This is their fair deal?”

Confronted by such disenchantment, QTU officials are blocking calls by members for details of the union’s QIRT submission on wages and conditions, falsely asserting that releasing information would undermine their case. According to a QTU statement: “We recognise members’ interest in the detail of the case; however, the QTU will only share information that does not compromise the arbitration.”

Encouraged by the QTU’s complicity, Premier David Crisafulli’s LNP government has rejected even a 3 percent interim wage increase and will oppose it in a preliminary QIRC hearing on August 24.

Previous QTU-sponsored surveys, dating back to 2018, have long documented the overwhelming workloads. One-third of surveyed teachers regularly contemplated leaving the profession due to health degradation caused by overwork. Only about 25 percent reported their workload as “manageable.” Teachers said they worked, on average, 44 hours per week, with special school teachers working an average of 46 hours per week.

These conditions are the result of previous arbitration processes that the QTU inflicted on teachers under Labor and LNP governments in 1997, 2000, 2003 and 2006. The current government has refused to release a Comprehensive Review of School Resourcing (CRoSR) that was promised by the previous state Labor government in 2022, as part of the last agreement, to address the workloads, poor conditions and staff shortages.

Similar discontent with pay and conditions has erupted among teachers nationally, including stoppages and protests in Tasmania, the Australian Capital Territory and Victoria. But the QTU and other teacher unions, all affiliated to the AEU, have deliberately kept the struggles isolated to individual states and territories.

Most immediately, the union bureaucrats want to prevent a confrontation by educators with the federal Labor government, which is systematically underfunding public schools, while pouring billions of dollars into AUKUS and other preparations for war.

The Albanese government’s May 12 budget continued to cut overall spending on public schools in real terms. It also

announced several major spending cuts, including for Student Engagement and Wellbeing programs and disability support services, despite planning to cut tens of thousands of children off the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), many of whom will be left depending on teachers and school support staff.

As shown starkly in Queensland, the AEU is not an organisation that functions in any sense on behalf of, or in the interests of, its members or the working class more broadly. Rather, it is incorporated into the capitalist state apparatus, of which the QIRC forms a key part. The QTU bureaucrats, together with their counterparts throughout the trade union apparatus, function literally as industrial police, enforcing the requirements of governments and the corporate ruling class.

Educators in Queensland, Victoria and nationally need to break out of this Labor-union straitjacket and democratically formulate and fight for demands based on their interests and those of their students. That means not only rejecting sellouts like the AEU is trying to ram through in Victoria but developing new forms of working-class organisation—rank-and-file committees—that will take up the necessary unified fight against the assault on workplace and living conditions and the preparations for war.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators’ rank-and-file network, is calling for an overwhelming “no” vote in Victoria, as part of this struggle. In doing so, we urge teachers to set up their own school committees, independent of the Labor and trade union machine. These committees can link up with workers globally via the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and develop a political fight against the subordination of all human needs, including education, to the profit demands of big business.

The CFPE fights for a socialist program: the reorganisation of society’s resources to meet human need, including a fully funded, world-class public education system for every child. To discuss forming rank-and-file committees, contact the CFPE.

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout

Register now for our June 14 public meeting.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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