

Educators strike in Australian capital as public education crisis deepens

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The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators' rank-and file network, urges all educators and workers to join its online national public meeting this Sunday, June 14 at 11 a.m. to discuss how to develop and broaden the fight against the sellout deal between the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the Victorian state Labor government, and the underlying austerity and war agenda of the federal Labor government. Click here to register.

Educators in Canberra, the Australian national capital, will take part in a 24-hour strike this Thursday over a real-wage slashing pay offer from the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Labor government and deteriorating conditions.

All public schools, specialist schools and preschools in the ACT will be closed for the day, showing the strength of support for the stoppage among the ACT's more than 4,000 educators.

The supposedly "progressive" Greens-backed Labor government of Chief Minister Andrew Barr has offered teachers a nominal annual wage increase of less than 3 percent, in line with its public sector pay framework. That is a significant pay cut compared to the current 4.2 percent official inflation rate, which even the most conservative estimates expect to soon exceed 5 percent.

ACT public school staff have already seen their income go backward under previous AEU-Labor enterprise agreements. In real terms, they are earning around \$4,000 less than they were in 2022.

Like their counterparts across the country, educators in the ACT face low wages, chronic understaffing and escalating workloads. Teachers report routinely supervising split or collapsed classes, in some cases managing up to 50 students at once.

These dire conditions have been imposed by successive Labor governments, which have governed the territory without interruption since 2001. This would not have been possible without the complicity of the AEU bureaucracy, which, until a two-hour stoppage on May 22, had blocked any such industrial action by ACT public school teachers and support staff for 15 years.

That the AEU has now been compelled to call a 24-hour strike reflects mounting anger among educators. In late April, AEU members—including teachers, psychologists and school

assistants—voted in a ballot for industrial action by overwhelming margins, with 95 percent voting in favour of strike action.

In response to Labor's blatant assault on real wages, the AEU bureaucracy has advanced a log of claims that contains no concrete pay demand and features vague language, calling on the government to "establish and fund minimum staff structures," provide "effective access" to psychologists and other support staff, and establish "fair and reasonable class sizes."

Educators be warned! The use of amorphous, unquantifiable claims—especially the absence of a definite wage demand—is a red flag that the AEU bureaucracy is preparing a sellout. It creates the conditions for the union leadership to declare "victory" on the basis of minor concessions and ram through a rotten deal in line with the demands of the Labor government.

In the fight for real wage increases and improved working conditions, teachers are up against both Labor, which has presided over the decline of the ACT public school system for more than a quarter of a century, and its willing accomplice, the AEU leadership. But teachers are not alone.

For the first time, school assistants are participating in industrial action alongside teachers and school leaders, reflecting the depth of dissatisfaction throughout the education workforce. In a city where government leaders and top executives are paid half a million dollars or more annually, school assistants earn between \$55,000 and \$85,000.

The school assistants include youth workers, science laboratory assistants, food technology assistants and art support staff. Their responsibilities frequently involve working with some of the most vulnerable young people in the ACT.

There is widespread support for the strike, with people taking to online forums to voice solidarity. On the Canberra Notice Board Group, one person posted: "We don't have enough teachers and we don't have enough support staff, which leads to teachers being left with oversized classes with no support and if what they'd deserve isn't enough, our teachers help shape our kids."

Jess Louise posted: "As someone that works in a support role at the college, I am amazed we have teachers at all! The amount of work they have to do not just physically, with teaching and

getting around the school, but the admin, the mental leadoff having to cater for each individual student, be emotionally available for every student, plus sticking to strict code of conduct, calling parents, and the MARKING that happens out of hours.”

The attack on wages, working conditions and critical public services, including education, is by no means unique to the ACT. It is part of a broader austerity drive being spearheaded by Labor governments at state and federal level.

The Albanese government’s latest federal budget, handed down on May 12, contains \$63.8 billion in further cuts to social spending over the next four years, including to public school funding and student wellbeing and disability programs.

Labor’s gutting of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)—the largest cut to a social program in Australian history, totalling \$35 billion—will push tens of thousands of students receiving NDIS-funded support into already underfunded schools. Teachers and support workers, already stretched beyond breaking point, will carry the burden.

At the same time, Labor has raised military spending to a record-high \$60 billion this year, with a further increase of \$53 billion to come over the next decade. So there are billions for war, but not public schools.

Labor plans to destroy some 28,000 public service jobs at the federal level, on top of thousands more sackings and a sector-wide assault on wages and conditions in the states, which is being facilitated by the union apparatus.

Teachers are in the crosshairs across the country. In Victoria, the AEU called off industrial action after a powerful strike on March 24 and in Queensland, the union likewise shut down industrial action against the Liberal-National government after two 24-hour strikes, pushing educators into the dead-end of protracted arbitration.

The AEU’s “in-principle” deal in Victoria, announced on May 15 after secret backroom negotiations with the Allan state Labor government, is a sellout. On top of a 10 percent real wage cut imposed since 2021, it would deliver a nominal pay rise of 6 to 7 percent a year, barely above current inflation. Already understating the real rise in the cost of living for working people, the official rate is almost certain to soar under the price-spiralling impact of the US-led assault on Iran, a criminal war of aggression that the federal Labor government has given its full-throated support.

Moreover, the proposed deal provides no class size caps or workload relief, and strips educators of the right to strike until 2030.

The AEU is trying to ram a ratification through its membership in Victoria via an anti-democratic process in which individual members’ votes are not even counted—a single delegate casts votes for every 20 financial members after a school sub-branch meeting, with no independent scrutiny.

Educators in the ACT, Victoria and Queensland, as well as elsewhere, face a similar assault on their wages and conditions.

The objective conditions pose the need for a unified struggle, but the AEU bureaucracy is ensuring teachers remain divided by state and territory borders and isolated from other sections of workers who are also under attack.

The fight for decent wages and conditions for educators is inseparable from a broader political struggle against Labor and its agenda of austerity and war. To carry this forward, teachers need to break out of the union stranglehold and take matters into their own hands. That means developing new forms of working-class organisation—rank-and-file committees—through which to democratically formulate and fight for demands based on their interests and those of their students.

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, politically and organisationally independent from the union. These committees can link up with workers nationally and 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.

To discuss how to take forward this fight, register for this Sunday’s online national meeting, titled “Vote No to AEU-Labor sellout! Build independent rank-and-file committees! Fund education not war!” or contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

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