

# Australia: Union offers no way forward for striking ACT teachers

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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.*

More than 2,000 public school teachers, learning support assistants (LSAs) and other education workers rallied in Canberra Thursday, as part of a 24-hour strike opposing the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Labor government's real-wage cutting enterprise agreement offer, which would further entrench dire conditions confronting staff and students. All 93 public schools, specialist schools and preschools in the territory were shut down for the day by the industrial action.

Educators told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters they face constant shortages of staff and resources. One teacher covering a combined class of 50 children in one room is an everyday occurrence. As a result, educators are regularly experiencing burnout and chronic depression.

The strike was a clear demonstration of the strong opposition among educators to the ongoing and deepening attack on public schools, where conditions are already close to impossible. But the Australian Education Union (AEU) bureaucrats who addressed the rally sought to channel this anger behind plaintive appeals to the same Labor government carrying out the attack.

The degradation of the ACT public education system and the deepening assault on working conditions for school staff have been directly imposed by the Greens-backed Labor government, which has governed the national capital without interruption since 2001.

The current Labor government, led by Chief Minister Andrew Barr, is now stepping up the attack, seeking to impose a nominal annual wage rise of less than 3 percent, far less than the current official inflation rate of 4.2 percent. The magnitude of such a real wage cut would be even greater, however, with the increase in the cost of living widely tipped to reach 5 percent by the end of the month before soaring higher still, largely as a result of rising fuel prices stemming from the US-led war against Iran.

The situation confronting teachers and other public school staff in the ACT is a familiar one for educators elsewhere in Australia and around the world. Thursday's strike in Canberra was motivated by the same impulse that pushed Queensland teachers to carry out two 24-hour stoppages last year and Victorian educators to strike and hold a 40,000-strong rally in March.

The attack on educators is part of a broader austerity drive, spearheaded in Australia by the federal Labor government of Prime

Minister Anthony Albanese. This agenda was expressed in last month's budget, which outlined more than \$63 billion in social spending cuts over the next four years.

Most notable was the gutting of \$38 billion from the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), which will strip all support from more than 241,000 current participants and drastically reduce the services available to hundreds of thousands more. This will directly impact public education, as tens of thousands of children with disabilities are denied funding for the day-to-day assistance they require, and already under-resourced and under-staffed schools are forced to do the best they can to meet their needs.

The federal Labor government's cost-cutting operation also includes a vow to slash 28,000 public sector jobs, a move likely to have an outsized impact in the ACT, where some 30 percent of workers are employed in the Australian Public Service.

These are the conditions ACT educators are up against. But anyone listening to the AEU bureaucrats speak at the rally on Thursday could be forgiven for thinking they had momentarily stepped into a parallel universe. Not a single word was spoken that reflected the existence of life outside the territory.

The March 24 strike by Victorian teachers was not mentioned, nor that further industrial action in the dispute was rapidly shut down by the AEU leadership, which is now in the process of trying to ram through a sell-out union-Labor agreement that will cut real wages and worsen conditions in schools.

The speakers were also silent on the two strikes last year by Queensland teachers, who have now been embroiled by the AEU-affiliated Queensland Teachers Union in an arbitration process that will continue until next year.

Although the rally took place in the nation's capital, just 3 kilometres from Parliament House, the federal Labor government and its agenda of war and austerity did not rate a mention.

The parochial character of the union speeches was not an accident. For the bureaucracy, it served two related purposes: First, to paint the problems of ACT educators as the unique product of isolated failings of the Barr government, separate from the actions of Labor governments in general; and second, cutting the striking workers off from educators elsewhere in the country who face similar battles, a situation which directly poses the need for a unified struggle.

AEU ACT Branch secretary Patrick Judge made the most explicit attempt to argue that the actions of the Barr government were a temporary departure from the supposedly glorious history of the Labor Party.

He declared, "When I think of the Labor Party, I think of Chifley's 'Light on the Hill' speech." Then Prime Minister Ben Chifley

delivered this speech to a Labor Party conference in 1949, declaring that the party's objective was the "light on the hill, which we aim to reach by working for the betterment of mankind." It is cited by Laborites as almost a sacred text, to promote the conception that the working class can advance its interests through parliamentary reform, within the framework of the Australian capitalist state.

Rhetorically addressing ACT Labor, Judge said, "I question what kind of Labor government you've become. And I remind you of the end of Chifley's passage: If it were not for the light on the hill, that great objective, the helping hand, then the Labor movement would not be worth fighting for. Well we're fighting for it."

This was not just a diversion, but a historical fraud. Just six weeks after delivering that speech, Chifley ordered the military to break a strike by 23,000 coal miners.

Moreover, the picture of Labor that Judge was seeking to promote is totally at odds with the current reality. Throughout the entire lifetime, or at least the working lives, of virtually all those present at the rally, Labor governments, together with the unions, have carried out the sharpest attacks on working-class jobs, wages and conditions and have spearheaded the gutting of public education.

Speaking earlier, AEU ACT president Angela Burroughs not only sowed illusions that the Labor government could be pressured to "come to the table" with a better offer, but that this process was already underway, after a joint censure motion against the education minister by the Greens and Liberals.

Burroughs claimed that "MLAs [Members of the Legislative Assembly] on all sides of politics are having what I can only describe as a 'love-in' for public educators."

The conception that the Greens and Liberals are somehow striding in to fight for the interests of teachers is a pathetic fraud. The Greens, for all their posturing, serve in a de facto coalition with the ACT Labor government, effectively supporting every one of its attacks. The arch-conservative Liberals oppose spending on public education as a matter of principle.

The clear message to the striking educators was that there is no need to keep fighting, their problems will be resolved through the parliamentary process. Underscoring this, Burroughs reported that she expected a new offer from the education minister the following day.

In other words, Burroughs was preparing the way for the AEU to shut down educators' industrial action and push through a sellout deal, just as her counterparts in Victoria are currently trying to do.

The stage was already set for such a betrayal from the beginning. The AEU log of claims does not include a concrete wage demand and the claims relating to working conditions vaguely call 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."

Burroughs and other speakers at the rally repeatedly emphasised that their claims were "reasonable not radical" and "about students, not self interest." These comments and the absence of a specific pay demand are intended to pressure educators into accepting a real wage cut in exchange for minuscule promised improvements to conditions for students.

In a further effort to hose down demands for further industrial action, Burroughs and other speakers repeatedly emphasised the "personal sacrifice" that educators were making by foregoing a day's pay and going on strike.

Thursday's strike was a powerful show of ACT educators' strength and determination. But it was also a revealing display of what the

AEU bureaucracy is preparing.

ACT educators should reject the union leadership's bankrupt perspective. Their fight for decent wages and conditions—and for a high quality public education system—is inseparable from a broader political struggle against Labor, not just in the territory, but federally.

Such a fight will require the development of 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.

They will find powerful allies in this fight among the growing number of educators and other workers around the country and globally who all confront similar attacks on their wages and conditions. Above all, what educators are up against is the capitalist system, under which vital public services, including education, are subordinated to the profit interests of big business.

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The WSWs spoke to striking educators at the rally on Thursday.

**Erin** told the WSWs, "I'm here for the students. I'm from a situation where, all this term, we've just been having collapsed classes. I've had classrooms full of, 40–50 kids sometimes.

"And one LSA shared between eight classes. I can't do my job without them. Students in my class, they desperately need their support and they're not there."

Asked about the prospect of a united struggle by educators in Victoria, Canberra, Queensland and elsewhere, Erin said, "we all should be united, that's a good point. I'd be happy to. I'm pretty sure everyone here would be happy to, as well."

**Gaby**, an LSA, said, "I'm here because I think, system wide, there's a problem that isn't being addressed. I think school staff are quite underappreciated in their role. And I think that we do have collective power as workers and we should use that collective power.

"I personally have gone through the rounds of burnout and then you recover and then you're back into it and I've seen my colleagues go through it and I've seen colleagues suffering from chronic depression.

"I think the NDIS cuts are appalling. I think that it's disgusting, and it was already, let's be fair, not good enough, and now they're destroying it even more. 100 percent, we're going to see that impact in classrooms when children are not getting the supports they need at home."

Speaking about the role of the AEU bureaucracy in isolating ACT educators, Gaby said, "It's probably a missed opportunity to ignore solidarity with other workers, like international workers, interstate workers, workers in different sectors and different industries."

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