

# Australian Capital Territory educators reject Labor's pay offer

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Public school educators in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) last week rejected the latest pay offer from the territory's Greens-backed Labor government and endorsed a program of escalating industrial action beginning the week of September 21 and continuing into Term 4.

The decision, taken at a members' meeting on September 11, raises the possibility of further stoppages, following an earlier 24-hour strike, beginning with short stop-work actions, but the Australian Education Union (AEU) leaders are pleading for talks with the government to head that off.

The government's offer comprised a 9 percent salary increase over three years, plus an additional increase for teachers at the top of the classroom pay scale and for some school leaders. At roughly 3 percent a year, the offer amounts to a real-wage cut for educators already earning around \$4,000 less in real terms than they did in 2022.

Public Service and Education Minister Rachel Stephen-Smith sought to dress up the rejected offer as a "genuine attempt" to reach a "fair and balanced agreement," claiming it "would have seen our public school teachers become the highest paid in the country, outside of the Northern Territory, from February 2027."

Such claims are a familiar divide-and-rule device, intended to isolate ACT educators from their counterparts in other states and territories and to obscure the fact that the offer fails even to keep pace with inflation, let alone reverse the sustained erosion of educators' living standards.

Stephen-Smith's recent appeal on social media to justify a shift to a "needs based system" of school funding, which she claims will lead to "additional resources and staffing for 2027" is equally hollow. In fact, the government's Student Resource Allocation model will, for many schools, mean significant funding

reductions.

This is under conditions where the reality confronting ACT educators is one of mass cuts to non-permanent staff, fewer support staff, larger class sizes and permanent staff being forced into positions outside their specialisations. One teacher's comment circulating on social media captures the situation: "This is all smoke and mirrors. Next year is going to be an absolute show! Watch more and more teachers leave and burnout increase!"

The degradation of the ACT public education system, imposed by Greens-Labor governments since they began governing the national capital in 2001, is responsible for the current debacle.

The latest offer is no improvement, despite a strike on June 11 that shut all 93 public schools, specialist schools and preschools, following unresolved negotiations on workload and pay.

On that day, more than 2,000 teachers, learning support assistants and other education workers rallied in Canberra. Educators told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters they faced constant shortages of staff and resources. One teacher covering a combined class of 50 children in one room was an everyday occurrence.

The ACT conflict is another expression of opposition among educators which has seen, over the past year, the first strikes in many years, including two 24-hour stoppages in Queensland, half- and full-day strikes in Tasmania and two strikes and a 40,000 rally in Melbourne. This rebellion is spreading into the private sector, with the first ever strike at Overnewton College in Victoria.

The conditions confronting educators everywhere are essentially identical: low pay, chronic understaffing, escalating workloads and the gutting of public education as part of a broader austerity drive spearheaded by Labor governments at both the state and federal levels.

The federal Labor government's May budget outlined

more than \$63 billion in social spending cuts over four years, including the gutting of \$38 billion from the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), while raising spending on AUKUS and other military programs to record levels. As a result of the NDIS cuts, tens of thousands of students will be pushed into already underfunded schools, and teachers and support staff will carry the burden.

Yet the union leaders have prevented these struggles from uniting. Not a single union speaker at the June 11 Canberra rally mentioned the Victorian strike, the Queensland strikes, or the federal Labor government's agenda of war and spending cuts—despite the rally taking place just three kilometres from Parliament House.

The parochialism of the union speeches was not an accident. It serves to paint the problems of ACT educators as the product of isolated failings of Chief Minister Andrew Barr's government, separate from the actions of Labor governments in general, and to cut striking workers off from educators elsewhere in the country who face similar battles, which directly poses the need for a unified struggle.

The experience of Queensland educators is a warning. Late last month, the Queensland Teachers Union (QTU) celebrated what it called a “significant win” when the state's industrial relations tribunal granted a supposed 3 percent interim pay rise. In reality, most educators will receive far less than 3 percent—some of the lowest-paid teachers nothing at all.

ACT educators should draw sharp lessons from Victoria. There, the AEU bureaucracy responded to two “no” votes and statewide strikes by repackaging the same sellout agreement with the state Labor government with cosmetic changes. Victorian educators had rejected the AEU-Labor deal by 57.7 percent in June and 51.2 percent in July—the first rejections of a union-endorsed enterprise agreement in more than 40 years.

In response, the AEU tabled a third version of what is fundamentally the same agreement, adding a \$2,000 sign-on bonus, while preserving a real wage cut, the absence of enforceable class-size caps and a four-year no-strike clause running until 2030. The AEU apparatus is desperate to impose its deal. Having secured a 79 percent Yes vote by AEU members—manufactured through suppressed debate and misinformation—the union bureaucracy declared that for the sake of unity, both AEU and non-union members had to vote Yes in an all-staff ballot.

This is similar to what the AEU is preparing for ACT

educators. The proposed industrial action for September 21 and Term 4 is a bid to head off the genuine anger of the membership. It is confined to the framework of the AEU's log of claims, which contains no concrete wage demand and whose conditions are couched in deliberately vague language in relation to staff structure, access to psychologists and other support staff and class sizes.

ACT educators should reject the union leadership's bankrupt perspective of appealing to the government for another offer. The fight for decent wages and conditions, and for a properly funded public education system, is inseparable from a broader political struggle against Labor, not only in the territory but federally.

That requires the development of new forms of working-class organisation—rank-and-file committees, politically and organisationally independent of the union bureaucracy—through which educators can democratically formulate and fight for demands based on their own interests and those of their students.

Through the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), educators in the ACT can link their struggle with those of their counterparts in Victoria, Queensland, Tasmania and around the world, and wage a unified fight against the subordination of all human needs, including education, to the profit demands of big business and the massive expansion of military spending in preparation for war.

#### **Contact the CFPE:**

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