Despite opposition, Australian Education Union shuts down action by ACT teachers

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Public school teachers in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) are confronting a sham new offer from the ACT Labor government that retains the same sub-inflation 9 percent pay increase over three years they rejected in September. This is being dressed up with a meaningless "staffing guarantee," which the Australian Education Union (AEU) leaders falsely hailed as a "significant development."

Teachers have reported that at a special AEU branch meeting on Friday night, there was an overwhelming vote by about 100 attendees to reject the offer. However, while opposition from educators forced the union executive to formally recommend rejecting Labor's offer, the union has called off all industrial action. Moreover, it said the proposal will be put to teachers in a ballot on November 26, which is close to the end of the school year on December 18.

This is a warning that the AEU officials are seeking to create the conditions for another sellout, despite the widespread hostility among educators to the latest offer and Labor's recently announced cuts to already under-staffed schools, on top of years of underfunding and below-inflation pay deals.

Since a powerful 24-hour stoppage by teachers and learning support assistants on June 11, the AEU bureaucracy has been heavily involved in negotiations with the government to shut down the struggle of ACT teachers after their first such strike action in 15 years. It had already suspended the rolling stop-work actions held in week one of Term 4 and then told members to pause while it "formally reviewed" the latest proposal.

The 9 percent baseline is another real wage cut for educators, already earning around $4,000 less in real terms than in 2022. Given that the official inflation rate is 4.3 percent, 3 percent annually is well below the soaring cost of living. The only additions are what the government calls "targeted pay uplifts."

AEU ACT branch president Angela Burroughs described the new offer as a significant shift, despite conceding: "Graduate teachers get an increase in salary in February 2029, as do top-of-the-scale teachers. For everyone else, and there's 16 different pay classifications for teaching and school leaders, it's exactly the same classification that was rejected in September."

In fact, the "structural pay incentives" for two wage bands are a transparent device to divide the workforce, while leaving the bulk of teachers worse off.

According to teachers, the "staffing guarantee" is another false promise. One educator told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "The pay offer is pathetic. All the so-called promises are in wishy washy language. No confidence these will lead to real change. From a personal perspective it would be to my benefit to vote yes as I retire soon. However, I will definitely vote no. It is going to worsen the teacher shortage."

Teachers have taken to social media to denounce the offer. "I don't want a drip feed pay rise of 1.5% every 6 months," one wrote. "Very disappointing." Another pointed to the government's funding and staffing cuts, asking: "A staffing guarantee the week after the budget cuts with schools losing teaching staff AND learning assistants for 2027? Where is the staffing guarantee?"

The AEU initially said the staffing guarantee transformed a simple wage negotiation into a workplace safety and retention package. According to both the government and the union, the mechanism would provide a more centralised approach to finding relief teachers when staff take leave, rather than relying on classroom teachers to absorb extra workloads.

Given the epidemic of split classes and teacher shortages, this is an empty promise. As one teacher

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said, no details have been given. Where would the funding, and more importantly, the staff come from, when there were not enough staff already?

On any given day in the ACT, an estimated 10 to 15 percent of a school's staff are absent due to sickness or stress. Individual schools have been managing the deficit behind closed doors. Primary teachers, for example, are frequently forced to take on up to 50 or even 90 students at once across mismatched year groups.

Compounding the staffing shortage is a funding crisis. It has been revealed that 84 percent of ACT public schools are operating over budget, limiting the money available for principals to hire extra support staff, putting maximum pressure on the teachers left standing.

The AEU admits that the guarantee is unenforceable. The union says it is "closely analysing the fine print," with "lingering concerns" over projected 2027 school budget cuts and whether the workload relief measures are "legally enforceable in the final text."

This is the same union apparatus that has endorsed the government's supposed "needs-based" funding restructuring, which is cutting the funding of 58 public schools in 2027.

The suspension of strikes—before members have even seen the full text of the offer—is the classic method of the trade union bureaucracy: demobilise the struggle first, then push through a cosmetically-modified deal.

The trajectory is similar to that in Victoria, where the AEU responded to two "no" votes and statewide strikes by repackaging the same sellout agreement with token changes.

Teachers cannot win through the AEU, which is working with the government to contain opposition. The ACT Labor government has been in office since 2001, sometimes in coalition with the Greens. It faces a $323.4 million budget shortfall and is slashing school budgets while the federal Labor government of Anthony Albanese has gutted $38 billion from the NDIS and raised military spending to a record $60 billion annually for the AUKUS war preparations against China.

Teachers should again reject the government's repackaged offer, as a first step. The struggle of ACT educators cannot succeed by appealing to the same Labor government carrying out the attack, nor by trusting the union apparatus now manoeuvring to shut down their fight.

The fight for decent wages and conditions, and for a properly funded public education system, is inseparable from a political struggle against Labor—in the territory and federally—and against the austerity and war agenda it serves.

Educators need to build their own organisations: rank-and-file committees in every school, independent of the union bureaucracy, through which they can democratically formulate and fight for their demands.

Through the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators rank-and-file network, and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), ACT educators can link their struggle with those of their counterparts and other workers across Australia and around the world.

The fight for public education is inseparable from the struggle against the capitalist system itself—a system that subordinates the education of children to the profit demands of big business and the plunge into war. To discuss this perspective and how to form rank-and-file committees, contact the CFPE.

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