Australia: Canberra technology educators oppose Labor's real pay cutting

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Educators and support staff at the Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT) are fighting the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Labor government's latest sub-inflation pay offer, as well as a proposed job-cutting merger with the University of Canberra.

They are doing so alongside ACT public school teachers and other public sector workers, but the trade unions covering them, primarily the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), are keeping their disputes separated.

The conflict over a new enterprise agreement at CIT, the territory's public vocational and technical college with campuses across the ACT, is part of public sector workers' unrest in Canberra, as well as nationally, because the federal Labor government is also demanding a continuation of sub-inflationary pay deals with the trade unions.

In the ACT, public sector workers have overwhelmingly rejected the territory Labor government's offer of a 9 percent wage rise over three years, which is effectively another pay cut with official inflation running at 4.3 percent, and real living costs rising faster.

On October 29, about 1,000 workers—including CIT staff, public health, construction, youth and correctional workers—joined a two-hour stop-work and rally to oppose the 9 percent offer. It was reported to be the largest coordinated public sector stoppage in Canberra since self-government in 1989.

At the same time, the AEU called off further strike action by government school teachers over the same basic pay offer, and has proposed no joint action with the AEU's CIT members. Last week, at a special AEU ACT branch meeting, teachers voted by a large majority to reject a sham new government offer based on a vague, unenforceable staffing guarantee, underscoring the potential for a unified fight.

In addition, opposition among public sector workers nationally has forced the CPSU to officially reject a similar pay-cutting offer by the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, while calling no industrial action and instead pleading for further talks with the government.

The CPSU, AEU and other public sector trade union bureaucracies are trying to keep these struggles apart and strike sellout deals to head off the growing confrontation with the Labor governments.

At CIT, workers are covered by two separate enterprise agreements, which have already expired. CIT General & Administrative Staff voted down the 9 percent offer in a formal employee ballot whose results were announced on September 9. CIT Educators (Teachers) have not yet held a formal all-staff ballot but the AEU council rejected the government's baseline offer last December and again in May.

CIT educators rejected the latest offer even though it was dressed up with a $600 to $1,000 cost-of-living payment, contingent on inflation reaching 3.5 to 4 percent, and a bringing forward to January 2028 of a superannuation increase to 13 percent. CIT educators are demanding top-tier national Technical and Further Education (TAFE) pay rates and wage parity with ACT public school teachers, as well as enforceable caps on teaching hours, student-free planning days, an end to unpaid overtime and stronger conversion pathways for casual and sessional teachers.

CIT employs 663 permanent staff—533 full-time and 130 part-time—supplemented by a fluctuating cohort of casuals. According to figures cited by one member of the ACT parliament, CIT's teaching workforce fell by 68 positions over the past decade. Now, following an operating deficit of $28.3 million in 2025, CIT management is calling for voluntary redundancies, deferring new hires, allowing fixed-term contracts to expire and reviewing all vacant positions.

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CIT educators have also pushed back against a proposed merger with the University of Canberra (UC), revived by UC vice-chancellor Bill Shorten in August. Educators have warned that this would erode CIT's TAFE purpose and hands-on training focus.

Shorten, a former national secretary of the Australian Workers Union who was federal Labor leader from 2013 to 2019, quit parliament in February 2025 to be installed as UC vice-chancellor on a salary of more than $1 million a year. At UC he has already presided over the axing of 120 professional roles and 71 academic positions.

In a September 2025 speech, Shorten spelt out the Albanese government's agenda for tertiary education. He called for a "fundamental re-imagining" of universities as a "core instrument of our national power," bound up with the AUKUS nuclear submarine program and other war preparations against China. He proposed dismantling three-year degrees in favour of "modular" micro-credentials to "produce the thousands of nuclear engineers, cyber specialists, and AI technicians that the AUKUS enterprise demands."

This is the real content of the UC-CIT merger plan: the subordination of education to the labour requirements and profit demands of big business and the war machine. This month, Shorten declared that CIT faces deeper budget and staffing cuts if it remains standalone—a threat that exposes the merger's function as a vehicle for further cost-cutting.

These developments are being driven by the austerity and war agenda of Labor governments at both the territory and federal levels. Facing a $323.4 million budget shortfall, the ACT Labor government is slashing school budgets. Education Minister Rachel Stephen-Smith this week announced cuts for 2027 while refusing to meet demands from parents and educators for details of which schools would lose funding.

The federal Labor government is cutting university, public education and health spending in real terms and gutting the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), while raising military spending to a record $60 billion annually.

CIT educators, like the territory's public school teachers and other public sector workers, cannot succeed by appealing to the same Labor governments that are implementing this assault, nor by putting their trust in the union apparatuses that are policing Labor's agenda.

Despite being compelled by the public school teachers' discontent over falling real wages and staffing shortages to recommend a "no" vote on a ballot on the government's latest offer on November 26, the AEU officials have refused to resume the industrial action that saw a strong one-day strike that shut all schools on June 11. This is a warning that the AEU bureaucrats are preparing the ground for sellouts, both for the schools and CIT.

The trajectory is similar to that in Victoria, where the AEU responded to two "no" votes and statewide strikes by public school teachers and support staff by repackaging a sellout agreement with the state Labor government with only token changes.

Educators and all public sector workers need to build their own organisations—rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatuses—to link up their struggles across the country and with fellow workers internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

The fight for public education at all levels is inseparable from the struggle against the war and austerity agenda of the Labor governments and 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 Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators' rank-and-file network:

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

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