

Australian educators speak about appalling working conditions and the union's complicity

Our reporters
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The Australian Education Union (AEU) in Victoria is currently negotiating a new industrial agreement with the state Labor government covering the wages and working conditions of public school teachers and Education Support (ES) staff for the next three years.

A long-standing issue among educators is their intolerable workload. In 2017, Victorian AEU president Meredith Peace said the agreement then negotiated between the union and the state government would begin to overcome what she acknowledged as “crushing workloads.” She urged teachers and ES staff to vote for the deal because it was a “great win” for members.

In reality, in the last four years the crisis has only worsened. The 2021 *State of our Schools* survey found that working conditions continue to deteriorate, with teachers working at least 15 hours of extra unpaid work, while principals worked 60 hours a week. Work-related stresses are at such an unsustainable level for teachers that more than 40 percent of the thousands surveyed said that they often think of quitting the profession.

Nearly 60 percent of ES staff reported increasing work-related activities, with no time to collaborate with teachers, parents, and guardians, and support students within paid working hours.

A recent online meeting convened by the AEU indicated the union's willingness to again ram through an agreement that does nothing to address the workload crisis and the deterioration of the public education system (see: “Australian Education Union's anti-democratic “town hall” meeting underscores danger of new sell-out industrial agreement”).

The Committee for Public Education recently

interviewed several primary and secondary teachers about their working conditions and on the role of the AEU.

Mark, a secondary Arts teacher in Melbourne, said, “I feel like a lot of Art teachers make a lot of lunchtime and after school commitments for their students. We put in a lot of effort with extra-curricular activities that are enriching.

“As a teacher of year 11 and 12 students I come in at least three times during the holidays for a whole day each time. With productions, I have noticed that other staff who have previously helped out are less inspired to do so simply because they are overworked and tired.

“Leading up to the show time of a performance we will come in for three weekends in a row working from morning until 6pm. A lot of these kids may not be going that well in school but they will be at rehearsals until 6-7pm. It is one place they can achieve something, whether it's backstage work, working on costumes, honing their skills on stage.

“We don't get any recompense for this, we can't complain because we are apparently easily replaced. We feel undervalued as staff members and the union just doesn't represent us.”

Susan, a primary teacher explained: “I have worked in two schools and while the pressures at each school are different, the workload and the type of work has continued to become unmanageable.”

She elaborated on the impact that increased class sizes are having on both teachers and students:

“Meredith Peace recently announced that Victorian class sizes are the best in the country with an average of 25. One wonders how this average was calculated, given the number of teachers reporting class sizes

closer to 30. What is not mentioned is the amount of class-splitting that is happening in schools. Almost every day, we have a class split due to teacher absences not being covered. Coverage for absences is severely underfunded and sometimes emergency teachers are not available.

“At my first school, the class sizes have continued to rise, with some classes having 30 students. On top of this, often, our non-face-to-face teaching time is lost due to specialist classes not being covered for the same reasons. While the AEU claims they do not support the practice of grade splitting, they do very little to curb it!”

Susan described how teachers are having to deliver pre-packaged programs in a one size fits all manner. “We also have lost a lot of autonomy. We now have to all plan in the same way. I’m expected to deliver lessons differently to suit this model. I’m no longer able to enjoy the craft of teaching, to attend to the needs of my students as I see it. The curriculum is so jam packed that I have heard discussions about whether to drop a reading session or a child-centred inquiry session. I’ve heard new young teachers say that they do not have time for foundation students to enjoy free or directed play sessions. No wonder our kids are stressed!

“We plan out each part of the session according to our instructional model. Some schools have introduced continuous reporting. Instead of writing reports twice a year we were now asked to upload assessment pieces on a fortnightly basis this includes commentary and rubrics to inform parents of where their children are at. I work from eight till six most nights and still bringing work home of an evening and on weekends. This was the only way to get it all done”.

Penelope, a secondary year 11 and 12 teacher in Melbourne, also spoke about class sizes and the impossibility of catering for mixed ability levels in schools: “There is no way there is enough time to do what you have to do. Differentiation within the classroom is essential in teaching. But who gets time to prepare different things for different students? It means that I don’t get around to the groups. The better kids tend to get neglected. The students can even lose confidence because you are constantly trying to make something work for everyone.

“Some students are reading at year four or five level and there are other learning difficulties, anxieties etc

and even a lack of confidence within students. A significant proportion of my class I would estimate are unable to work with the program that the majority is using.”

Mark condemned the AEU for its role during the COVID outbreaks in 2020, saying, “I felt disillusioned everyday last year during COVID when the union president Meredith Peace never addressed the concerns we had. I felt like saying, ‘Why are you being so complicit with the government?’ You simply copy and pasted the government website during 2020 with the coronavirus threatening us. It was teachers rather than the union who did anything to protect safety.”

Penelope in speaking about the AEU said: “The union agrees with the education department. They aren’t fighting for anything much. If I was in strife, I would go to a lawyer. I don’t feel I could trust the union.”

On the AEU campaign, **Susan** concluded: “I’ve been following the AEU negotiations, attending regional meetings for updates and as far as I can tell the only work the union is doing is agreeing with and collaborating with the department for very little! Their campaign centres around lobbying Labor MPs. Much of our working conditions, including NAPLAN, increases in so-called productivity, have been introduced under Labor governments. I think this shows once again the true nature of the union’s work, which is to work with the government. There is no evidence whatsoever that the union is fighting for better conditions for us.

“The planned actions are an absolute joke. They include wearing red, posting on Facebook what we’re doing out of hours and joining ‘hubs’ to express our concerns to local MPs. Despite a push to have the agreement signed off before the end of May, there is no discussion of any type of strike action, mass meetings or even small meetings to allow members to raise their concerns or to force any sort of improvements to our abysmal conditions.”



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