

# Australian school support workers condemn worsening conditions and union's role

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Educational support (ES) workers in Victoria are speaking out about their shocking conditions, which are the responsibility of the state Labor Party government and the Australian Education Union (AEU).

Behind the workers' backs, for the past six months the AEU has been negotiating a new four-year enterprise agreement with the government that will only intensify the erosion of pay and conditions for public school teachers and ES staff.

In a bid to posture as taking a stand, the union has promoted the slogan: "Time to turn up the heat on the state government." In reality, the AEU is opposed to any mobilisation against Premier Daniel Andrews' government. During a "Week of Action," the union instead called on teachers to wear red clothes to school and document the huge amount of overtime they perform. Yet these conditions are a result of the last AEU sell-out agreement.

Promoting dangerous illusions in the Andrews government, the union is organising delegations to local MPs, claiming that once politicians are made aware of the terrible circumstances confronting education workers, they will move to improve them (see: Australian Education Union announces phony "week of action" over Victorian teachers' workplace agreement).

At a recent online "town hall meeting," the AEU sought to prevent teachers and ES workers from having any say. The union leadership announced that no resolutions would be allowed. To further stifle discussion, the chat box and the unmute function to speak were disabled (see: Australian Education Union's anti-democratic "town hall" meeting underscores danger of new sell-out industrial agreement).

The AEU has repeatedly claimed to be taking forward the interests of ES staff, who play a crucial role in the running of schools. In 2017, the union boasted it had just negotiated "the best agreement to date, bringing major improvements for Victorian ES staff."

But the reality exposes such fraudulent claims. Many ES staff are part-time or on contract. They are mainly women, or students living on poverty wages, unable to survive

without a second job or the support of a partner or parent.

ES workers have a variety of roles in schools, including financial and administrative work, IT and library aides. Most are supporting students with learning difficulties, physical disabilities and behavioural issues. A 2017 report demonstrated that only 4 percent of public school students meet the criteria for disability funding, while another 11 percent are estimated to have a disability, yet receive no targeted resourcing.

ES staff, along with teachers, face an increasingly impossible situation, with insecure employment, continued funding cuts, and growing numbers of disadvantaged students with an array of social problems, creating complex difficulties within classrooms.

In an AEU survey conducted this year, 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.

An ES staff worker in a secondary school commented in the survey: "Our schedules constantly change to accommodate absences, changes in funding. I find myself working with students I have never met before, with little idea of their needs outside of the few short minutes glancing at an Individual Learning Plan.

"When my students ask me 'are you going to be here next lesson,' I cannot truthfully even say 'Let me look at my schedule.' I sound like so many other figures in their lives that should have been there, been their advocates and instead I am just another transient let-down of an adult."

The Committee for Public Education recently interviewed ES workers about their pay and conditions and the role of the AEU.

**Kieran**, an ES worker in a primary school, said: "I work with disadvantaged kids who are sometimes a danger to themselves and to others as well. Only certain kids are funded, but there are unfunded kids as well that ES staff have to look after..."

"When I can, I work one-on-one with kids. I try to help them with their work or I take them outside to calm them

down. I love the people I work with, but there is always some kind of tension between staff. Teachers will crack it after having an unfunded kid and no support in that room and nothing can be done. I see teachers leaving. It's like a revolving door here and the new ones coming in are fresh out from having got their degrees.

"The school I work at is a low socio-economic area. It has about 300 students and is so underfunded, and it is not improving.

"I feel because of the low pay it doesn't actually feel like a real job at all. Often, I would be lucky to have \$100 to spend on food over two weeks.

"The only ES staff who can continue to work are people with partners or university students with five people in a house to pay the rent. No-one could walk into this job and leave their old one just because they wanted to help children. People would love to, but everyone has bills and payments to make. You can't live on this wage. We get peanuts and our job can be so challenging.

"When we had COVID outbreaks last year we still had to work on-site, helping students of parents who worked in essential services. We had a small number of kids at the school, but they were always the ones that we work with, the kids with disabilities, troubled kids...

"I honestly feel that we were lucky we didn't get COVID. If one of those kids had got COVID, all the staff would have caught it.

"I didn't feel protected at all. The administration didn't want to deal with the parents, meaning that we just became a day-care service for their kids. I don't feel that governments care about us. But there are so many needs of students that aren't met. The AEU has never come to our school."

**Talia**, who works in a secondary school, was critical of the union. She stated: "I don't see how the AEU can say the previous 2017 agreement was good. The 2014 agreement made my conditions worse.

"I think ES staff are worked to the bone... It's like the administration wants to get their value out of you. An ES staff member who is a classroom aide works from 8.30 a.m. to 3 p.m. They get a percentage of say \$38,000.

"I don't think the AEU has done anything for ES staff. Our dimensions of work should have been assessed years ago. Most ES staff feel that they are working over their hours. Some ES staff have been at the same pay level for decades. People always do more than what their levels are. They are doing tasks that they aren't being paid for because of their knowledge.

"People come in optimistic. They don't know the reality of how bad this is. They realise that teachers and the principal class want things to be better but there's just no budget for this. There isn't enough money at schools.

Schools are stretched."

**Jan**, who works in the secondary sector, commented: "I have worked as an ES staff member for 10 years... The full-time wage I would be on is about \$46,000 per year, and that is after being there for a decade. You can't live on that. It would all be gone once you've paid for rent and utilities. The majority of people living on this wage have to move back home with their parents.

"Integration aides are flogged the worst. What they are expected to do and the money they get is ridiculous. They have the most difficult students and the worst conditions.

"On occasions they are almost attacked by their students. They are then given extra jobs such as school interviews and at the end of the year the integration aides have to clean the kitchens. I feel like saying, 'Just give them a break.' They are certainly not given the recognition they deserve.

"Without the integration aides I think the teachers would go psychotic. The aides look after some severely-affected students who, without them, would be constantly interrupting classes. I've seen it when an aide is away. The whole dynamic of the class changes...

"Teachers are also getting flogged. The class sizes are just getting bigger; they are ridiculous. We have kids that have psychiatric issues and I've seen teachers just crying at the end of a class.

"As far as the AEU campaign is concerned, I wouldn't get involved. If you asked anyone here, they wouldn't know what the union does. What do they do? As far as the new agreement goes, I expect nothing. My expectations are zero. My conditions just keep getting worse...

"They [unions] are not a body that is good for workplaces... The union fees come out of my pay and we are told, 'You've got to be in the union in case something happens.' It sounds like scaremongering to me."



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