

Australian school year commences amid ongoing mass COVID infection, workload crisis, staffing shortages, and record inequality—Build rank-and-file committees to fight for a fully funded public education system!

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE)
26 January 2023

The Australian school system reopens in 2023 in conditions of enormous crisis. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated long-standing problems within the schools—there is chronic underfunding, staffing shortages, an unprecedented divide between affluent and working class schools, and teachers and school staff are enduring crushing workloads while having their real wages eroded by escalating costs of living.

This situation has not emerged by accident—it has been engineered by successive Labor and Liberal governments at the state and federal levels, in collaboration with the Australian Education Union. The time has come for teachers and school workers to take a stand!

The Committee for Public Education calls for the development of a unified counter-offensive, aimed at securing decent pay and conditions for all educators, and a fully funded and freely accessible public education system that provides the highest quality schooling for all children and young people, regardless of their family's wealth.

The past twelve months have been a nightmare for countless teachers and school workers.

2022 began with the forced reopening of the schools amid a record surge of COVID-19 infections. This measure was a critical component of the Australian ruling elite's embrace of a "let it rip" strategy, abandoning all public health measures that had previously contained the spread of the virus. The approach was driven by concern to protect corporate profits—then Prime Minister Scott Morrison openly acknowledged that schools had to be kept open in order for workers to return to their workplaces and for "shops to be open."

This deadly policy was implemented by the alliance of Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews with his far-right New South Wales counterpart Dominic Perrottet and then Prime Minister Scott Morrison. It has been continued by the Albanese Labor government. Since its election in May 2022 more people have died of COVID than in the two-and-a-half years prior.

COVID surged through the schools last year, belying numerous lies from government officials that schools were not vectors of transmission and that children did not spread the virus. While proper

statistics do not appear to have been kept, or if they have they are being suppressed, it appears that only a small minority of school workers avoided contracting COVID last year. Many teachers and education support staff contracted the virus numerous times. How many school workers were killed last year from intra-school transmission? How many now have Long COVID? That the answers to these basic questions are unknown reflects the political establishment's indifference to the consequences of mass infection.

The end of zero COVID in China has triggered new mass infections, further raising the danger of new, vaccine-resistant variants of the virus. Nevertheless, in 2023, the pandemic has been falsely declared as over by state government authorities. One especially malicious implication of this is that immune-compromised educators are not permitted to work from home and teach remotely—leaving them with the dilemma of whether to return to the classroom and risk dangerous infection or to quit the profession.

The pandemic has only exacerbated the school staffing crisis. Before COVID-19 there were significant staffing pressures, due to teachers quitting the profession because of untenable conditions in the schools. This includes enormous unpaid overtime expectations, excessive administrative responsibilities including imposing regressive standardised tests, and inadequate support for dealing with students with additional needs and challenging behaviours. An Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership survey last year found that full-time teachers typically worked 55 hours a week, on average 45 percent more hours than they are paid for.

A large proportion of graduate teachers quit within their first few years, while an extraordinary 50 percent of all student teachers quit their courses before graduating.

The school year commences with thousands of unfilled positions across the country. Previous government forecasts anticipated a shortage of more than 4,000 teachers across Australia by 2025. However, the situation is already worse than that. In New South Wales, latest available figures show 3,300 vacant positions, and in Victoria, there are 1,100 teaching positions still vacant for 2023. This

is triggering additional classroom overcrowding, cuts to curriculum programs, teachers being asked to fill roles outside their area of expertise, and further workload pressures.

The teacher unions are directly responsible for the situation. Last year in multiple states including Victoria, Western Australia, Queensland and New South Wales, new enterprise agreements were imposed that delivered real wage cuts and maintained terrible workplace conditions, including effective unpaid overtime requirements.

To take one example, in Victoria, the Australian Education Union last July rammed through an agreement with the state Labor government that involved a nominal wage rise of less than 2 percent a year for the next 4 years, no substantive measures reducing workloads, and new unfunded time in lieu provisions that have triggered the cancellation of camps and other extra-curricular activities in numerous schools. Nearly 40 percent of Victorian school staff voted “no” to the deal, defying union misinformation and censorship. Similarly significant opposition was registered in other states to union-government agreements.

Anger and oppositional sentiment must be organised in 2023! The Committee for Public Education urges educators to form rank-and-file committees in your schools. These would unite school staff—teachers and education support staff, union members and non-members alike—with supportive parents and students, providing a democratic forum to exchange information and discuss what needs to be done. Within each school, a rank-and-file committee would strive to return decision-making power to educators, including on how and what they teach, countering moves to silence teachers while principals and Department of Education officials exert unchecked authority.

A wide network of rank-and-file committees, led by trusted staff members in each school, can collectively discuss the way forward and develop the necessary industrial and political struggle. This would involve a concerted turn out to other sections of the working class confronting similar problems, in the first instance fellow public sector workers such as nurses and hospital workers.

Such a campaign can only be developed independently of the Australian Education Union (AEU) apparatus. The bureaucracy comprises a distinct and privileged social layer—senior officials’ incomes places them in the top 1 percent of income earners. Federal AEU president Correna Haythorpe received \$268,000 in salary and benefits in 2021; state officials do similarly well, with the Victorian secretary and president each receiving more than \$248,000 in salary and benefits in the same year. These privileges ultimately derive from the bureaucracy’s collaboration with state and federal governments. The union apparatus imposes sell-out agreements on teachers and school workers, and works to sabotage any resistance to the undermining of the public education system.

As a consequence, Australia now has one of the most unequal school systems in the world. After decades of Labor and Liberal governments funnelling billions of dollars into the private system, a record 46 percent of secondary students now attend private schools.

Elite schools are among those enjoying lavish public subsidies. These have gone towards state-of-the-art facilities and resources for drama and the arts, music, sport, computing technologies—exclusively available to the children of the wealthy, those able to afford annual tuition fees approaching \$50,000.

Meanwhile numerous public schools in working class communities are literally falling apart. Basic infrastructure needs are left unaddressed. Overcrowding is seeing dozens of portable classrooms

installed in what ought to be playground space. Curriculum options are being cut to the bone due to underfunding and staffing shortages. There are some highly regarded, mostly inner-city, public schools in the country’s major cities—but these academically selective schools serve to cream off many of the most academically capable young people, leaving other public schools with disproportionate numbers of children with additional academic, social, and behavioural needs.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) urges all teachers and school workers to take up a fight for the principle that public education at every level ought to be freely provided, fully funded, and delivered to every child in a similar manner to that currently provided for the narrow layer attending elite schools. This struggle—waged in tandem with that for decent wages and conditions for every educator—would receive enormous support within the working class.

Securing the social right of every person to be able to access a public education system worthy of the name requires a political struggle against the Labor and Liberal state and federal governments. This includes the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, which is entrenching its predecessors’ reactionary policies while preparing additional ones of its own. In the guise of addressing the staffing crisis, the government is moving to undermine the teaching profession by downgrading required qualifications and narrowing the curriculum.

The struggle for high-quality public education, as well as healthcare and other fundamental social rights, inevitably raises broader political issues. While governments claim there is “no money” for these essential services, hundreds of billions are being expended on the military, in preparation for wars that threaten a nuclear catastrophe. In the first three weeks of the year alone, the federal Labor government spent over \$4 billion on advanced weapons systems.

The CFPE calls for the widest discussion among educators on the necessity for a socialist program, which would involve the establishment of a workers’ government, and the implementation of policies based on social need, not private profit, including free, high-quality education for all, from kindergarten to the tertiary level.

The CFPE, initiated by members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party, has a principled record of fighting for the interests of teachers, school staff, and the working class as a whole. We have collaborated with educator rank-and-file committees internationally, developed through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. We pledge every assistance to educators seeking to establish and build rank-and-file committees in your school. Contact the CFPE today!

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