

Australia: Teachers speak on impact of union betrayal in Victoria, public education crisis

Sue Phillips
6 March 2023

The 2023 school year began in late January and early February with public schools facing an unprecedented crisis, due to staffing shortages, worsening conditions, poor pay, and with COVID-19 infections spreading in the schools.

This has resulted in increasing numbers taking early retirement, others shifting into the private school sector and many leaving education altogether. A recent survey of 4,000 teachers by the Black Dog Institute indicated that 47 percent of teachers were considering changing careers in the next 12 months due to unmanageable workload. One in four teachers reported that they were being forced to teach outside their expertise and qualifications.

In the state of Victoria, the Australian Education Union (AEU) last year rammed through a regressive industrial agreement covering 90,000 school workers. Nearly 40 percent voted to reject the deal struck by the union bureaucracy and the state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) spearheaded the campaign to reject the enormous real wage cut and entrenched excessive workloads. The onerous agreement is now being enforced in the face of ongoing hostility among teachers.

Several teachers in Victoria recently spoke with the CFPE about the mounting crisis.

Leanne (not her real name), a **primary school teacher from southeast Melbourne**, explained: “I voted against last year’s agreement. The extra one hour per week time release from face to face teaching does not decrease our work load, and the pay rise was not nearly enough. The union said they were going to ask for 7 percent but we did not even get half of that. Two percent is not a wage increase.”

Describing the complex issues educators confront, Leanne said, “Our school has a huge number of students from low socio-economic circumstances and we have some kids who receive the highest disability funding. We have students with ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder], ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder], Oppositional Defiance Disorder, developmental delays, lots of kids with intellectual

disabilities, speech problems and even then, the government lifts the threshold to get funding.

“I had a kid who was analysed as requiring the highest level of support, but even then he did not have a full-time support staff member to assist. At a friend’s school they have a staff member who is allocated entirely to writing submissions for funding for kids with disabilities and learning issues. And the government is wondering why we don’t want to stay in teaching?”

Leanne explained how the pandemic has affected staffing in her school: “Pre-COVID we would advertise jobs and we would get 50 applicants, now we are lucky to get five. CRTs [casual relief teachers] were hard to get last year, so students are split into other classes and that is an extra load for teachers. We are expected to have work packs ready to go when the kids are split. And when teachers are sick, you still are expected to prepare work for the class. I often think, well I might as well go into school even though I am sick. Lots of teachers say that.”

Leanne spoke on the AEU’s censorship. “Before the 2022 agreement was passed, a guy on the union’s Facebook page wrote, ‘don’t vote yes, vote no to the agreement.’ He had this awesome argument and he got something like 400 likes—within a few hours, his post was deleted by the union. Teachers need to be making decisions, not the AEU president. The government and union officials are not in the classroom, they have no idea what we are dealing with.”

She added: “I have attended one of the CFPE’s online meetings. It provided very insightful stuff. We need to get the CFPE out there, known. So many people would benefit from the Facebook group the CFPE has created. I am glad I found it. I think there are a lot of people out there who would like to participate in discussions and improve our situation.”

Lorelai, a casual relief teacher (CRT) working in the outer western suburbs of Melbourne, said: “Full time work is too stressful. Working as a CRT means I have no marking, no after-school meetings, no curriculum designs to create, and no contact with parents. Before the year had

started, I had already been signed on by a school for all of Term one for 4 days a week. Last year, the school struggled to get more than 2 CRTs per day. This is not enough for a large school. They already know that they are not going to fill all positions by the start of this year and they are desperate.”

Lorelai commented on how demands on teachers have intensified over the last decade: “When I started teaching 7 years ago it was hard to get a job, especially an ongoing permanent position. There was so much competition for every job. Depending on how good the school was there could be a hundred applicants for a job, but now so many positions are not being filled. There are always new initiatives demanded by the Department of Education, this is even before we have implemented and understood the last one. We are continually playing catch up. Workload has become unmanageable.”

Lorelai said that she opposed the industrial agreement, but like other CRTs had not been permitted to vote on it. “The union tried to guilt trip everyone into voting for the agreement saying that if you don’t vote for it then all the hard work we have done to earn these great ‘wins’ will be lost,” she explained. “The unions cower down to what the government wants. I quit the union after the last agreement.”

Sandra, (not her real name), **a teacher in a P-12 school in the northern suburbs of Melbourne with 16 years of teaching experience**, said: “We definitely have staffing problems and have increasing enrolments every year. We are even getting kids from the independent schools who are being thrown out because they are not reaching the academic standards of the school. Where I am, there are housing estates popping up all the time in predominantly immigrant areas with refugee communities.

“To cover classes, schools are reshuffling allotments. Some teachers are teaching outside of their expertise for the first time. One of the biggest problems is students lacking English language skills. Some students have been in Australia long enough not to qualify for an EAL [English as Second Language] classroom and have to go into mainstream classes. We have some students in Year 11 that are at a Year 5 reading level. During COVID, like a lot of the schools, we had to funnel the tutoring program teachers to cover classes without teachers.

“Even though the Department offers Targeted Financial Incentives for teachers—there is an extra \$9,000 bonus to come to our school—we still do not even get applicants. It is hard where we work, there is a stigma and some behavioural issues, like many secondary students. Kids come from situations of domestic violence, substance and drug abuse, and we have a big student vaping problem.”

Sandra spoke on the unresolved COVID crisis: “When

masks were taken off as mandatory for students, I caught COVID for the first time and brought it home to my family. I describe it as the gift that keeps giving. I was told that I needed to get a statutory declaration that I caught it at school so I could claim infectious diseases leave. We had no PPE, no protections and kids unmasked. I tried to get a statutory declaration from three doctors and they said I don’t know whether you got it at school. Luckily my principal accepted my infectious diseases leave.

“The union did not advocate for our health—we have a lot of immune-compromised staff. I don’t agree with putting our health at risk to open the economy, not without pandemic leave and not without PPE. It is hard to find a staff member that has not had COVID, some have had it twice or more.”

She added: “The union agreement is revolting. One hour a week or half an hour of planning and assessment time a week does not give me time to do anything. I argue, give me money, not time, because time will be taken away. I think the 1 percent nominal wage rise over 6 months is a joke—the union lied to us.

“Our school was nearly 90 percent opposed to the agreement, and I’m guessing 60 percent have left the union. I have been deleted on the union Facebook. Why can’t I be critical of what the union has done as a member? Meredith Peace the AEU state president has close ties to the Andrews government and did not want to ruffle feathers. Peace’s salary is exorbitant compared to ours.”

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout>

Twitter: @CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact