

Australian Catholic school workers threatened with substantial real wage cut by teachers' union

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Around 25,000 teachers and school workers within the private Catholic system in the state of Victoria are voting today and tomorrow on a new industrial agreement that includes nominal wage rises of just 1 percent every six months over the next four years.

This represents a substantial real wage cut. The official inflation rate is currently just under 8 percent, but the cost of living for working-class people is rising even higher than that. Energy costs, to raise just one example, rose by 14.3 percent in the twelve months before March 2023, and from July 1, are set to rise by another 25 percent.

The proposed agreement has been negotiated between the Independent Education Union Victoria Tasmania (IEU) and the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV), representing Catholic school employers.

The IEU apparatus—headed by general secretary Debra James, annual salary and superannuation \$252,000 and who retired last month—has signed off on a draft agreement that very closely aligns with the sellout deal covering public school teachers worked out between the state Labor government and the Australian Education Union (AEU).

That agreement also involved a nominal wage rise of 1 percent every 6 months (equivalent to less than 2 percent a year) and bogus adjustments to workload requirements. The AEU mounted a systematic censorship and disinformation campaign to ram through the agreement, though nearly 40 percent of teachers voted to reject it (see: “The Australian Education Union betrayal of Victorian public school workers and the need for rank-and-file committees”). This has resulted in terrible working conditions in the

public schools, a massive staffing crisis with hundreds of educators leaving the profession.

The IEU appears to be mimicking the AEU’s playbook with regard to efforts to block teachers from understanding the contents of its agreement.

Union officials have claimed that wage rises in the draft agreement amount to 9.3 percent over four years, plus an additional 4 percent in allowances, without any supporting evidence.

However, the only way to make a meaningful assessment of the actual wage increases that teachers will receive from this agreement is to calculate the total amount they will earn across the four years, and compare it with the total amount they would have earned had 2021 wage rates been had applied over the same time frame. When this calculation is done, on the basis of the figures supplied by the IEU itself, it turns out that the highest level teacher will earn \$460,790 over four years, as opposed to \$432,012 if 2021 wage rates were maintained. This includes both the allowances, and the biannual 1 percent pay rises enshrined in the agreement.

The percentage increase over four years is therefore equal to 6.7 per cent, approximately equivalent to 1.8 per cent per year. When a similar calculation is done for the lowest level (graduate teachers), it is found that they can expect to receive a total of \$310,780 over the 4 years, as opposed to \$288,232. This amounts to a percentage increase of 7.7 percent over 4 years, or approximately 1.9 percent per annum.

The deal has been met with significant opposition, expressed on the IEU’s Facebook page. Comments included:

“We will be stuck on 1% every 6 months until 2027

as this deal does not conclude until commencement of 2026. We will be so far behind financially you will never be able to make it back.”

“We have a shortage of teachers with teachers leaving in big numbers. Documentation is on the increase with teaches snowed under. And what is our reward? Have 1% every 6 months!!! “Well done IEU for devaluing our profession. A disgrace!”

“For the first time ever I’m considering voting NO and after 32 years as a union member, cancelling my union membership.”

The union responded to such sentiments by issuing an online document just days before the vote titled “Agreement Mythbusters!” The first “myth” it outlined was: “We should oppose this Agreement because salaries don’t keep up with inflation.”

In fact, this is incontrovertibly true, as the union bureaucracy had to admit. Its “myth busting” amounted to a desperate attempt to cover its tracks. First it insisted that “since these salaries were negotiated the cost of living has risen much faster than anyone had predicted,” then it added that costs of living were rising higher than wages “for most workers in Australia and many other parts of the world over the last 18 months.”

Finally, the union document stated, “We have never sought to peg salaries to inflation.” It insisted that teachers would have been worse off if salaries were tied to inflation over the last two decades.

This position is pure sophistry. Teachers and school workers have nowhere sought to impose the inflation rate as a *ceiling* for salary increases—rather annual inflation ought to be a floor, as any wage “rises” below this serve to reduce educators’ living standards.

The IEU has touted purported gains in workplace conditions and workload. In reality, however, the agreement will do nothing to resolve the exhausting workloads of teachers in the Catholic sector.

There is a proposed one hour of reduction scheduled class time per week in 2023, and then a reduction of 1.5 hours per week in 2024 and 2025. This minimal measure, the same as that worked out between the AEU and state government in the public school sector, leaves teachers with some of the highest face-to-face teaching loads among countries in the OECD. An extra 1.5 hours a week out of the classroom does not cover the countless administrative and assessment obligations that have been overloaded on teachers in the last period.

Moreover, the paltry reductions in scheduled class time per week will be counteracted by reductions in professional practice time (PPT, these are designated days set aside for teachers to do work outside of the classroom). In 2022, there were 4 days set aside for PPT, in 2023 this has been reduced to two, and in both 2024 and 2025 there is only one PPT day set aside.

The IEU bureaucracy claims on its website that it has “won time in lieu provisions.” However, the time in lieu arrangements are devolved in all cases to individual schools and whatever consultative committees are able to negotiate with management. In other words, the union claims that it has achieved great recognition for TIL in this agreement, but in reality, everyone is on their own as to how to negotiate it and achieve a “fair outcome.”

There has been no reduction to maximum class sizes (still 29 in P-Year 10, and 27 in VCE classes).

Likewise absent from the proposed agreement is any mention of the ongoing COVID pandemic. Teachers, school workers, and their students are being made to endure the threat of entirely preventable infection and illness in order to advance the interests of big business and finance capital. The IEU is separating this industrial agreement from any connection to the COVID disaster—yet the right to a safe workplace is fundamental to any legal document governing conditions in schools.

Educators and school workers covered by the IEU agreement ought to vote “no” as an initial step in developing a counter-offensive in defence of wages and conditions throughout the school system, Catholic and public. Teachers are encouraged to contact the Committee For Public Education to develop a discussion on how to take forward such a unified political fight.

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

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