

South Australian public school staff strike again for better wages and conditions

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Thousands of educators in South Australia took strike action on Thursday, the second one-day action since September, opposing the state Labor government's wage-cutting drive and worsening conditions in public schools.

The action was over a proposed new three-year enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) for public school staff. Thursday's industrial action closed 172 schools and 200 other educational facilities, including pre-schools, with many adopting a modified program. Educators rallied outside the parliament in central Adelaide, expressing their anger and determination to fight the appalling conditions in schools and reject the government's latest inadequate offer on wages and in particular workload.

In the recent ballot for industrial action, over 83 percent of staff voted to strike. Escalating opposition to the worsening crisis in public education found expression at the Adelaide rally, with hundreds of educators holding hand-made placards. These included: "Teacher burnout is why we have this turn-out," "Teach in a school for one term and let's talk again about funding workload," "Teachers are an endangered species," and, "Come teach in my underfunded classroom." Others highlighted the allocation of billions to nuclear submarines.

The strike followed the state Labor government issuing a provocative third EBA offer, which in some respects was even worse than their previous proposal.

The second offer involved a 3 percent nominal salary rise each year—substantially below the inflation rate—plus two \$1,500 sign-on payments. In its third offer, the government retracted these additional proposed cash bonuses and urged teachers and school workers to accept a 4 percent wage increase over the first year, followed by 3 percent in the second year and

2.5 percent in year three.

Australia's official inflation rate is higher than 5 percent, while the cost-of-living hikes for many essential items, including housing and groceries, are substantially higher. The state Labor government, in other words, is determined to impose a substantial real wage cut on public school staff. South Australian teachers are already the lowest paid nationally, with graduates earning less than \$75,000.

On the key issue of workload, the government has offered a pittance of one hour extra non-instructional time a week—with this to be allocated over the next seven years based on a so-called Index of Educational Disadvantage (IOED).

This index is used by the Department for Education to allocate resources to schools based on socio-economic status. The most disadvantaged schools have an index of 1, the least disadvantaged have an index of 7. Funding allocation is determined by economic disadvantage, migrant students, and neglected and homeless students. Under the government's proposed EBA, in 2024, index 1 will receive an hour of non-instructional time and then consecutively through the 7 indexes up until 2030. In other words, many teachers will not receive the additional non-teaching hour until the end of the decade.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) has repeatedly stated its willingness to strike a deal with the government, jettisoning all the key demands issued in its log of claims. These included an initial wage rise of 8.6 percent, followed by 5.5 percent in the following two years, a 20 percent reduction of face-to-face teaching time and funding for a School Support Officer (SSO) in every classroom.

The government's hardline position has fuelled teacher anger, with the AEU bureaucracy evidently

concluding that it cannot at this point ram through a sell-out agreement as it has done numerous times before. At an AEU press conference on Tuesday, outgoing union state president Andrew Gohl (annual salary \$208,000) complained that the wages offer was “the same as, if not worse, than the last,” and that it was “disappointing to see such contempt.”

State Labor Premier Peter Malinauskas has dismissed teachers’ demands on both salaries and workloads, declaring that there was “no way that the government can accommodate an 8 percent pay rise.”

Malinauskas heads a right-wing, pro-business state government that is determined to heed the financial markets’ demands for austerity spending cuts.

The Ernst & Young finance company issued a report last month that detailed South Australia’s worsening state debt, now the second highest in the country behind Victoria, when measured on both a per capita basis and as a percentage of gross state product.

Total state debt is projected to rise from \$26 billion this financial year to more than \$37 billion by 2026–27. Ernst & Young warned: “Governments will either need to divert spending away from other public services, increase taxes, sell assets or further increase debt as a result of higher borrowing today.”

Reducing real wages for teachers is part of this agenda to cut public services. At the same time, vast sums are being funnelled into the military. Yesterday, the day after the teachers’ strike, Premier Malinauskas announced with federal Defence Minister Richard Marles a major joint investment in the defence industry. This includes funding for 27,000 students and 1,500 teachers in at least 180 South Australian schools to support STEM education connected with defence projects, including nuclear-powered submarines being developed through the AUKUS alliance.

Schools in South Australia, like public schools nationally, are reaching breaking point, with unprecedented teacher position vacancies. SA Education Department statistics reveal that 266 teachers resigned and 311 retired between June 2022 and June 2023. These statistics represent about 3 percent of the department’s teaching workforce. Since 2020, resignations have doubled. More than 1,800 students in SA do not have a permanent teacher, and 50 percent of teachers have indicated they will leave the profession in the next five years.

AEU officials next week resume behind closed doors discussions with government representatives. South Australian teachers and school workers cannot wait for the outcome of these discussions, which will inevitably culminate in another proposed EBA that cuts real wages and does nothing to improve conditions.

The AEU bureaucracy’s last agreement involved nominal wage rises of just 2.35 percent and did nothing to reduce either workloads, class sizes or rates of casual employment. That deal was only narrowly rammed through in December 2019, with a 54–46 percent vote of union members.

One experienced teacher in Adelaide this week told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “I fear that this agreement will follow the same course as last time. I think we will get another terrible agreement and teachers will leave in droves. But lots of teachers are now saying we should refuse to go back to school in 2024. The public education system is dying.”

In South Australia, as nationally, teachers and school workers face the urgent task of taking their struggle out of the hands of the teacher union bureaucracy by constructing rank-and-file committees in the schools. A network of these democratically elected organisations, independent of the union apparatus, needs to organise the broadest democratic discussion within the schools on the necessary next steps.

The only organisation fighting for this perspective is the Committee for Public Education. We encourage public education workers to contact us and discuss the way forward.

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