

Australian school year begins amid unprecedented crisis of public education system

Committee For Public Education
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Australia's 2024 school year commenced last week with the public education system under ferocious assault.

This is not a new phenomenon—successive Labor and Liberal-National governments have for decades minimised funding to public schools—but the crisis has now reached a qualitatively higher level. Classrooms are at breaking point, with the worst ever teacher shortage fuelled by excessive workloads, real wage cuts and mass COVID-19 infection. The curriculum is increasingly regressive, directed towards artificially boosting standardised test results, and influenced by militarism through school programs tied to the anti-China AUKUS alliance.

At the same time, the private school system continues to reap billions of dollars in annual funding. This includes the most elite institutions, which charge annual tuition fees of \$50,000, allowing the children of the ultra-wealthy access to first-class learning facilities, including for information technology, music and the arts, and sport. Australia has one of the most privatised school systems among advanced capitalist countries—over 40 percent of children attend private secondary schools, more than double the OECD average.

The ruling class has consciously engineered the education crisis, working hand in glove with the teacher union bureaucracies.

A form of social apartheid now exists, where youth from different socio-economic backgrounds now only rarely attend the same schools. The children of a highly privileged minority alone have access to a properly resourced, all-rounded education within elite schools. Even within the public school system, a clear divide exists between the small number of relatively well resourced, selective and inner-city public schools that mostly serve the middle class, and those public schools in outer, working class areas that are frequently overcrowded and dilapidated.

The Committee for Public Education calls on teachers and school workers to join our ranks this year and fight for a counter-offensive that aims to secure decent conditions and wages for all educators, within 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.

Many teachers have sought to deal with intolerable workload demands by reducing their hours, working as casual relief teachers, or quitting the profession entirely. The situation is exacerbated by systematic real wage cuts that are the result of below-inflation

enterprise agreements agreed to by the AEU in every state. Agreements have been rammed through using antidemocratic and bureaucratic methods, misinformation and censorship.

Thousands of classrooms across the country lack a regular or properly qualified teacher as a result. Every educator knows of situations where teachers are being asked to supervise more than 50 or 60 students at a time, where unqualified people are taking classes, or where students have nothing but an irregular roster of relief teachers in their classroom.

In New South Wales, nearly 2,000 full-time teaching positions were left unfilled at the end of last year and 10,000 classes in the state had to be merged or cancelled. The situation is no different in any other state, though exact figures are being deliberately concealed. In Victoria, the state Labor government has refused to publish its 2022 and 2023 teacher supply and demand reports, despite previously doing so each year. Freedom of information requests to the state's department of education related to the workforce shortage have been blocked.

Secrecy likewise surrounds the impact of the ongoing COVID pandemic. The dismantling of all public health restrictions in late 2021 and early 2022 centrally involved the forced reopening of the schools. This was a critical component of the drive to remove all restrictions on the profit-making operations of big business, with children in school facilitating the full return of workers to their workplaces. The consequence has been multiple waves of infection, with schools functioning as vectors for disease transmission. All infection tracking has since been abolished, making it impossible for epidemiologists and others to know how many children and school workers have been infected as a result, and how many are afflicted with debilitating Long COVID symptoms.

The Australian Education Union and its state affiliates played the critical role in defusing and blocking concern and opposition to the elimination of proper public health precautions in the schools.

The union bureaucracy—staffed by senior officials earning close to or more than a quarter of a million dollars annually—is now playing a similar role amid the staffing crisis. Opposition and anger is being channelled into futile efforts to pressure the Labor Party, in office federally and in every state and territory with the exception of Tasmania. The AEU campaigned for a Labor victory at the last federal election and is exerting every effort to cultivate

the illusion that Prime Minister Anthony Albanese will deliver “fair funding” for public schools.

In reality, the Albanese government has maintained the exact same funding model as its Liberal-National predecessor. It has likewise enacted no substantial measures to deal with workforce shortages. Labor’s “action plan” released last year involves largely token measures involving just \$328 million of additional government funding over nine years. Several of its policies involve degrading the teaching profession, such as having university students take responsibility for classrooms before they have graduated.

The Labor government has suggested that it will this year increase spending on public schools to redress the shortfall in per student funding. No educator should lend any credence to this. Any additional funding allocations will take the character of an emergency stop gap aimed at preventing the outright collapse of school systems in some working class areas.

The framework of the government’s spending initiatives is highly regressive. This is the School Resource Standard, initially devised by corporate figure David Gonski more than a decade ago. This involves calculating school funding based on the number of students who are disabled, Aboriginal, live remotely, etc.—but the amount of money allocated is ultimately based on the calculation as to how much is required for 80 percent of students to meet literacy and numeracy benchmarks determined by the hated NAPLAN tests (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy).

In other words, even if every school received 100 percent of its School Resource Standard, which is highly questionable, this would still leave large numbers of students without the assistance and resources they need. Proper educational provisioning for all students, not just the wealthy, requires the allocation of vast additional sums of public funds, far beyond that proposed in any of the various Gonski models.

The Albanese government advances right-wing, pro-business policies at home while escalating militarism and war abroad. The AUKUS alliance with the US and Britain involves extraordinary new armaments spending, including \$368 billion on nuclear submarines, equivalent to extracting nearly \$150,000 each from all 2.5 million public school children. Numerous curriculum projects, especially in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths), are now sponsored by BAE systems and other weapons manufacturers.

The Labor Party’s complicity in the genocidal Israeli onslaught on Gaza has extended to victimising and threatening teachers and school workers who have taken a public stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people. Educators have been slandered in the media, falsely accused of anti-semitism, and threatened with disciplinary measures including deregistration. The Committee For Public Education demands the end to all such victimisations and defends the democratic right of all educators to voice their opposition to war and imperialism.

The CFPE seeks to unify the struggles against war and militarism, against the systematic degradation of the public education system and for decent wages and conditions for all school workers. This can only be effectively taken forward in

opposition to the Labor government and the entire political establishment, as well as against the AEU apparatus.

We urge 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 determined 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.

The struggle for high-quality public education, as well as healthcare and other fundamental social rights, clashes at every step with the diktats of big business and finance capital. This is the case in every advanced capitalist country, with public schools under attack around the world. The CFPE calls for the widest discussion among educators on the necessity for an internationalist and 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 and encourage making contact with the CFPE to discuss this perspective.

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