

# Western Australian school teachers to strike, first time in a decade

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Thousands of public school teachers across Western Australia (WA) will strike for a half day tomorrow (Tuesday), the first time such industrial action has been taken in the state for more than a decade. Angry and frustrated about the terrible conditions in schools, teachers will rally in Perth, the state capital, with demonstrations also organised in regional centres such as Broome, Albany, Geraldton, Kalgoorlie and Karratha.

The industrial action is for a new wages and conditions agreement between the state Labor government of Premier Roger Cook and the State School Teachers Union of Western Australia (SSTUWA). The SSTUWA has been negotiating with the government since October. Its log of claims includes a 12 percent pay increase over two years, 7 percent in the first year followed by 5 percent in the second.

The government's latest offer is for an 11 percent increase, spread over three years, beginning with a 5 percent rise in the first year and 3 percent in the subsequent two years. This amounts to a real wage cut.

Whether 11 percent over three years proposed by the government, or 12 percent over two years from the union, neither addresses what teachers have sacrificed over the previous four years. Amid a skyrocketing cost of living, the Labor government and the unions have enforced a public sector wage freeze.

The punitive wage-cutting policy imposed by previous Labor Premier Mark McGowan affected 150,000 public sector workers, as part of an austerity drive dictated by the corporate establishment. In an attempt to stifle public sector opposition, the government later imposed a massive fine of \$350,000 on the nurses' union for taking strike action against the wages cap.

The government's offer to teachers is a pittance, under conditions where in the last state budget review for 2023–24 the government announced a surplus of \$3.7 billion based on rising iron ore royalties. The state Labor government holds a historic majority, with 53 of the 59 seats in the parliament's lower house.

In a media statement, SSTUWA President Matt Jarman described the latest government offer as an “insult” that did not address “significant workload issues” and class sizes that are “the biggest in WA compared to anywhere else in the country.” He said that there was a “crisis” in the public-school sector.

To describe the deal as an “insult,” and speak about a “crisis” in public schools is a massive understatement on both fronts.

The appalling state of affairs in public schools is not a new phenomenon—successive Labor and Liberal-National state and federal governments have for decades minimised funding to public schools.

The crisis, however, 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, increasing student disengagement, violence and behavioural issues, and COVID-19 infections. The curriculum is increasingly regressive, directed towards artificially boosting standardised test results and influenced by militarism through school programs tied to the AUKUS alliance.

Many teachers have sought to deal with intolerable workload demands by reducing their hours, working as casual relief teachers, or quitting the profession entirely. In Western Australia more than 6,000 teachers have left the profession over the last four years. As a result, hundreds of classrooms lack a regular or properly qualified teacher.

In WA this crisis has been sharply highlighted in numerous union surveys, independent reports, and in the education department's own research.

In the union's 2023 State of Schools' survey, an extraordinary 90 percent of respondents said that their workload was currently high or very high. More than 32 percent reported working more than 40 hours, another 30 percent working more than 50 hours, and another 10 percent working more than 60 hours.

For principals, 73 percent reported staff shortages at their school. Another 39 percent reported working more than 50 hours a week and 23 percent said they worked more than 60 hours a week.

As a result, 89 percent of teachers have reported very high stress levels and 86 percent had considered quitting in the last four years.

In a desperate attempt to plug a haemorrhaging staffing crisis, this year the government has employed 100 teachers from overseas and adopted a policy of employing unqualified staff. Last month the union reported that 7 percent of teachers who were hired from the beginning of the year were yet to finish

training or had limited registration.

Recent posts on social media express the reality in schools: “A pay rise would be great but it’s the working conditions driving teachers away and causing a chronic teacher shortage,” one teacher wrote.

Another explained: “Right now, at my school (rural WA) we’re short by 5 FT [full-time] staff. The rest of us are dealing with collapsed classes, adding further stress. My school hasn’t had an English teacher since the end of Term 3, and been advertising for one since August last year. Since then, I think we’ve had a grand total of 2 applicants.

“New teachers are doing well if they last a term. I have a student whose last school was [in] Hedland and they told me they had 6 teachers for English last year. All graduates. All quit.

“Since the last decent pay rise 7 years ago, inflation has caused prices to rise 25 percent while teachers’ pay has gone up 11 percent. The union’s 7 percent demand, if accepted, would still mean an effective pay cut in real terms.”

The government is fully aware of the scale of the crisis. An investigation commissioned by the SSTUWA and chaired by Carmen Lawrence, former WA education minister and premier, involved meetings across the state and consideration of more than 130 submissions from parents, teachers and educational experts.

Lawrence’s report, titled “Facing the Facts,” concluded: “The profession is at breaking point [...] public schools have been starved of funds and support while coping with accelerating demands on the curriculum and the challenge of educating many more disadvantaged students and students with increasingly complex needs. The cumulative impact of frequent policy changes, [...] the intensity and complexity of workloads, lowered morale, increased burnout and created an environment in which teachers feel undervalued and disrespected. Many teachers, particularly in disadvantaged schools, are paying a high personal price for staying in the profession.”

The report made no mention of the previous decades of sell-out deals, consciously engineered by governments and signed off on by the unions, that have led to the crisis.

The SSTUWA executive has claimed in the log of claims that “there will be NO trade-offs or any diminution of conditions and entitlements.” This statement is belied by the union’s record. Such comments from highly paid union executives have been heard many times before as they sign off on agreements that accept wage cuts, inadequate resources, and maintain excessive workloads.

The last SSTUWA agreement accepted impossible class sizes of up to 32 students for Years 4–10. Even this number is routinely exceeded due to the staffing crisis. The last agreement also contained clauses increasing pressure on teacher performance, with teachers continually experiencing intrusions into “Duties Other Than Teaching” (DOTT). This is time scheduled outside of face-to-face teaching, designated for

preparing materials, planning lessons, record keeping and report writing.

Such deteriorating conditions are not unique to WA but are expressed in teachers’ agreements nationally.

In the last two years, sell-out agreements have been imposed in nearly every state. In 2022, the Australian Education Union (AEU) in Victoria rammed through an agreement with the Labor government that imposed a wages cut of less than 2 percent and did nothing to address intolerable working conditions. Forty percent of teachers opposed the deal pushed through via union misinformation, censorship and undemocratic processes, while the union fraudulently claimed a “victory” (see: “Australian Education Union rams through deal to slash Victorian teachers’ pay and conditions”).

In New South Wales in 2021 and 2022, teachers held three statewide stoppages to fight workloads and poor pay and conditions. In November 2022, New South Wales Teachers Federation leaders shut down all strike action, urging teachers to back the election of a state Labor government in May 2023, claiming it would improve pay and conditions. Last week the Minns government announced budget cuts of \$148 million to public schools this year and \$1.4 billion over 4 years.

At the beginning of this year in South Australia, the AEU followed the same course, imposing a sell-out deal complying with the austerity agenda of the Malinauskas Labor government dictated by the banks and international credit agencies.

For years, the teacher unions have worked to diffuse anger over pay and conditions. They have worked to isolate teachers both from each other and broader sections of workers, who are increasingly calling for action to fight the cutting of pay and conditions. In order to fight for sustainable workloads, decent wages and high-quality public education, teachers need to build their own organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees independent of the union apparatus and link up with teachers in other states, and broader sections of the working class, including other public sector workers.

We urge teachers to contact the Committee for Public Education today to discuss this perspective.

**Contact us:**

**Email:** [cfpe.aus@gmail.com](mailto:cfpe.aus@gmail.com)

**Facebook:** [facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout](https://facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout)

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