

Australian educators speak on deteriorating conditions in Victorian schools after sell-out union agreements

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23 January 2025

Monash University researchers recently issued two discussion papers highlighting the untenable and appalling working conditions in Victoria's public schools. Educators suffer from poor wages, excessive workloads and growing staff shortages, creating a profound crisis in the public school system.

However, the research was commissioned by the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the findings make no reference to the union bureaucracy's responsibility for the worsening conditions in schools, through its numerous sell-out agreements negotiated with governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, over decades.

In 2022, the AEU forced through another wage-cutting agreement with the state Labor government, despite strong opposition from teachers amid soaring living costs. The deal failed to address class sizes and offered only minimal reductions in workloads, which were quickly absorbed by additional school meetings and activities. As a result, more than 40 percent of teachers rejected the agreement, and thousands resigned from the union in protest.

Members of the Committee for Public Education, which called for the rejection of the deal and fought for the formation of rank-and-file committees to take forward the struggle, recently spoke with several teachers on how conditions in the schools have changed since the imposition of the sell-out.

Amanda, a primary school teacher, said: "The AEU promised 'significant gains' from our last agreement. I don't think anybody was under any illusion that was going to be the case! Still to this day, I can't find any teacher who voted 'yes' to the agreement, or who believes that it was a good thing. 2023 and 2024 were really tough years in education—the toughest yet. 2025, I can only believe, will be harder again.

"The last deal was pushed through in the most anti-democratic way. The union prevented people speaking at online meetings, which happened because of the pandemic.

The union decided who spoke and they censored oppositional voices on the AEU Facebook page. In online meetings they stifled comments even in the chat and then when it came to the vote, it was voted school-by-school, not through the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). That's interesting considering other votes, including being able to attend an AEU conference as a delegate, are overseen through the AEC.

"As the CFPE predicted, we took a massive pay cut in real terms. Not getting increments means that my wages have only gone up based on the measly 1 percent every six months. This is well below the increased cost of living."

Amanda explained how staff shortages were further exacerbating dire conditions in the schools. "The main thing I believe teachers wanted in the last agreement was a decrease in our face-to-face teaching time and a decrease in class numbers. The agreement kept our class sizes exactly the same. However, due to the staff shortages, we are continually impacted by classes being split, as we can't always access Casual Relief Teachers (CRTs). By the end of the year, schools have no funds to employ CRTs and we end up having extra kids in our rooms for weeks on end.

"This means that our class sizes, of an average of 26, were actually more like 30 for the majority of Term Four. The AEU promised us an extra hour of non-face-to-face time that was supposed to be autonomous time. Principals interpreted that clause the way that they wanted to. We still have meetings in those hours, and other jobs to do, which means the extra hour is not autonomous at all. Our working conditions have become so regressive. We need to take our future off the hands of the union bureaucrats and develop organisations where we can discuss and put forward our own demands on wages and conditions."

Robert, a Learning Specialist in a Melbourne secondary school, also spoke on the staffing crisis.

He said: "We've been told at my school that we're practically fully staffed going into next year—but being fully

staffed in 2025 isn't the same as being staffed in 2019. Being 'fully staffed' in 2025 means Assistant Principals are teaching. It means Leading Teachers and Learning Specialists on laughably inadequate time allowances are teaching. It means interns and fresh grads who need to be mentored, but no one with the time to mentor them. It means waiting to see how many staff actually come back after the break. It means out-of-control student behaviour and battered teacher morale after four years of understaffing and high turnover. And it means having to listen to Ben Carroll, the Minister for Education, sit there and tell the public that everything is fine."

Robert added: "Teachers who were at the top of the pay scale at the expiration of the last agreement are \$15,000 a year worse off in real terms today. And the 'historic' 90-minute-a-week reduction in face-to-face time that these pay cuts brought haven't been properly implemented.

"Many schools, particularly and unsurprisingly in the traditionally hard to staff low-SES schools, are now bearing the brunt of the state's catastrophic teacher shortages. Schools are dealing with student behavioural problems.

"This is a complex problem and I am sure there are all sorts of social factors feeding into the behaviour we're seeing. For example, the impact of prolonged lockdowns due to COVID on adolescent socialisation, absent and overworked parents, and an understandable feeling that education is worthless. But at the school level, the biggest factor seems to be the breakdown of whole school behaviour management processes thanks to high turnover and inexperienced teachers who lack the confidence to hold students to account."

Carolyn, a primary school teacher in Melbourne, commented: "We face many problems at our school related to funding and lack of safe school buildings and infrastructure. I don't think there has been any significant renovations since the early 1990s. Nearly 10 of our classrooms are portables. Some are old, some new, and some have had to be removed because of general disrepair and asbestos. Because of enrolments, we have had at times had to use specialist classrooms as general classrooms."

On workloads, Carolyn explained: "Every school day I come into work an hour early. So that's an extra five hours every week. Most days I stay back at least an hour after school and after meetings. All up for the week, I am doing an extra 10-12 hours beyond the school day. This does not include stuff I do on the weekends.

"Sometimes my partner messages me and asks when I am coming home. Once I get home, I am still thinking about what stuff I didn't get done and have to get done before the next day, or for the next meeting. None of this includes report writing and preparing Individual Education Plans

(IEPs), which can take hours. I know of some teachers who have to prepare 9 IEPs in one class alone."

Carolyn described the changing situation in schools over the past decade. "I did my degree 10 years ago and teaching has changed so much. There is a certain conception in the media about teaching—a perception in sections of the general public that filters down to the students. It is hard to explain, but some students don't see why they are at school, that they are there to learn, to allow other students to learn. It sometimes feels that we are there just to entertain students, and we seem to be losing respect and authority in the classroom.

"As teachers we are expected to deal with students' psychological needs or emotional wellbeing and mediate between students when they're having issues on social media. There are so many different roles that we're expected to fulfill, but in a lot of cases, we aren't qualified to be able to help them in these ways. We do have counsellors and wellbeing support, but we have so many kids who need to access this. I have had kids in my class with really volatile behaviours. Students who would just tip over tables and rip things up. That then goes out into the yard as well, with violence between students, and even some teachers feel intimidated. It is actually really dangerous."

Carolyn continued: "In the past we had an education support staff member in a class, or shared between two classes to assist, but now that funding is being directed somewhere else. When incidents happen, we can call a principal or call wellbeing staff, but half the time principals are in meetings, or they're already caught up with someone else who's having the same behaviours somewhere else.

"The union agreement did nothing to address these problems. As soon as the agreement was gotten through, the union was then out campaigning for the election of the Labor government."

If educators would like to report on conditions in your schools, please contact the Committee For Public Education. Statements can be anonymous.

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