

Australia: Build rank-and-file committees against accelerating assault on public education!

Committee for Public Education

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The beginning of the 2025 school year has seen the release of new data pointing to the depth of the crisis confronting the public education system.

Successive Labor and Liberal-National governments have deliberately engineered a situation in which there is an accelerating transfer of students to lavishly-funded private schools, while public schools remain starved of basic resources.

Countless public schools across the country, especially those in working-class communities, are stricken by crumbling infrastructure, inadequate provisions to deal with complex student needs and staff shortages. Teachers and education support workers are dealing with crushing workloads and declining real wages.

Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows that enrolments have surged in private schools in the past five years. The total number of students in Catholic schools has risen by 6.6 percent, and in so-called independent schools (non-Catholic private) by 18.5 percent. Over the same period, enrolments in public schools increased by just 1 percent.

The creeping privatisation of school education is accelerating under the Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. Australia has one of the highest rates of private school enrolment in OECD countries, with more than 40 percent of secondary students now in private schools.

The ruling elite has designed a semi-privatised, socially segregated school system, within which numerous families are either unable to access public schools or feel compelled to enrol in private education due to inadequate resources in the public system.

In every Australian city, property developers have built outer suburban estates that are populated by working families unable to afford exorbitant housing costs in inner-suburban areas. These frequently lack basic public infrastructure and facilities, including schools, with Catholic and independent schools the only option.

At the same time, public schools are often overcrowded and have a grossly disproportionate number of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. A research paper issued this month by the Save Our Schools organisation showed that the percentage of students from families deemed low socio-educationally advantaged in public schools is nearly 200 percent higher than in Catholic schools, and 285 percent higher than in independent schools.

Overworked and under-resourced staff in public schools are forced to deal with the numerous effects of poverty and disadvantage on young people—including mental health issues, substance abuse, violence, absenteeism, hunger and classroom disruption.

A recent Monash University survey of Victorian teachers found that many work up to 60 hours a week, equivalent to 1.5 extra unpaid days weekly. Among those intending to leave, 76 percent aim to exit within four years, with 83 percent citing workload, 70.5 percent low pay, and nearly 65 percent student behaviour. Statewide, 1,500 teaching roles

remain vacant, while applications per position have plummeted from 10.6 in 2020 to 2.8 in 2022.

This crisis reflects broader national trends—to take just one other example, rural areas in Queensland now register 1,700 vacancies.

At the other end of the class divide are the elite private schools that charge as much as \$50,000 in annual fees. These provide the best education money can buy, with high teacher and tutor to student ratios, and lavish facilities for sports, music and drama, and computers and technology.

Despite these schools' enormous flows of tuition fees, donations and investment income, they continue to receive tens of millions of dollars in public funding every year. A recent *Guardian* report found that the 20 private schools with the wealthiest parent cohorts last year together received \$130 million in federal and state government funding. Two private schools in Victoria, Haileybury College and Caulfield Grammar, spent more on capital works (\$391.8 million combined) from 2012 to 2022 than the entire Tasmanian state public school system, consisting of 190 public schools.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators' rank-and-file network, warns that the school system is at a tipping point. Left unchallenged, current trends will soon reduce public schools to little more than dysfunctional rump institutions that serve only the most disadvantaged layers of the working class.

We call 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.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) and its state affiliates bear direct responsibility for the crisis. In every state and territory, repeated sell out enterprise agreements have been rammed through after misinformation campaigns and anti-democratic manoeuvres. These agreements have seen public school teachers' workloads increase every year, while pathetic nominal wage increases have been subsumed by escalating costs of living.

Untenable working conditions have seen numerous experienced educators quit the system, while record numbers of university students shun teaching degrees. Resulting staffing shortages have exacerbated tensions within the schools, with classes cancelled and merged, class sizes ratcheted higher, and speciality subjects being taught by unqualified staff.

The AEU has repeatedly sought to defuse widespread anger by channelling opposition behind the Labor Party's federal and state election campaigns.

Senior union bureaucrats—each receiving an annual income of more than a quarter of a million dollars—have hailed the Albanese government's new

school funding model, the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement. The purported guarantees of fully funded public schools are a fraud. Under the agreement, the federal government will increase its funding of the Schooling Resource Standard from 20 to 25 percent by 2034. Whether this will ever be delivered is highly questionable given the crisis of the global economy and accompanying demands for austerity being issued by finance capital. Any government in office in the next ten years can simply legislate revisions to the agreement.

Even if implemented, the additional funding would represent a drop in the bucket. To take one example—in Victoria, the Labor Party has boasted that the funding model will see an additional \$2.5 billion in federal funding over ten years. This, however, amounts to just \$160,000 per school, per year—not even enough money to employ an experienced teacher and education support staffer.

In addition, the Albanese government has emphasised that there is no “blank cheque,” and that “reform” measures must be implemented in public schools, further increasing staff workloads. New initiatives include a regressive standardised phonics test for Year 1 students, requirements for so-called evidence-based teaching, and measures aimed at boosting Year 12 graduation rates.

None of these requirements apply to private schools, which will continue to receive no strings-attached public funds. The AEU has no principled opposition to the “reforms,” with its only concern being that time is allocated for teachers to implement the government’s regressive agenda.

With the full support of the unions, curriculums are being narrowed in line with corporate demands for a readily employable workforce with basic literacy and numeracy skills. Classes involving creativity and critical thinking are being downgraded, and it is now commonplace that public schools are unable to staff or fund the creative arts, PE, drama and music.

At the same time, the Australian ruling elite is preparing for war against China, with billions diverted into the military budgets. The agenda involves the promotion of militarism within the schools, especially through the promotion of nuclear submarine construction and other armaments production through the AUKUS alliance. Numerous curriculum projects, especially in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths), are now sponsored by BAE systems and other weapons manufacturers.

The Albanese government’s complicity in the genocidal Israeli onslaught on Gaza, including its silence on Trump’s criminal plan to ethnically cleanse the territory, 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 antisemitism, and threatened with disciplinary measures including deregistration.

The CFPE seeks to unify the struggles against war and militarism, with those against the systematic degradation of the public education system and for decent wages and conditions for all school workers. This can only be taken forward in opposition to the Labor government and the entire political establishment, as well as against the AEU apparatus that has acted in partnership.

Public education is under assault around the world. One of the sharpest expressions of this process is in the United States, where the fascist Trump administration is gutting federal education expenditure. This assault forms an important component of the US ruling elite’s social counter-revolution, in which imperialist war machinations abroad is accompanied by the slashing of public spending in order to further boost the profits of the corporations and ultra-wealthy.

In Australia in recent years, thousands of educators have quit the unions after ongoing sell-outs. However, such actions do not counter the attack on public education, nor do futile efforts to pressure union leaders to defend teachers. Real power must return to rank-and-file school staff, with

new organisations breaking free from the constraints of the union bureaucrats. School employees must take control, forming rank-and-file committees to build a nationwide network.

These will 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, developing a program of action.

The CFPE suggests the following demands, as the starting point for the widest discussion among teachers and school workers:

- An immediate 40 percent pay increase with salaries indexed against inflation, and automatic cost-of-living adjustments.
- Maximum class sizes of 15-20. End administrative burdens so teachers can focus on teaching. A minimum of 8 hours weekly during school hours for planning, assessment and collaboration.
- Abolish NAPLAN and other regressive standardised testing measures that legitimise funding cuts for “underperforming” schools.
 - End the authoritarian imposition of mandatory teaching methods—teachers must have the democratic right to collectively decide on curriculum implementation.
 - Hire thousands of teachers and support staff to end punishing workloads. At least one ES member must be employed full-time per class. Re-employ experienced educators driven out of the profession.
 - Fully funded support services for all students, including those with diverse needs. Employ psychologists in every school.
 - Ensure properly ventilated classrooms including HEPA filters to mitigate the risk of COVID infection. Schools must no longer be vectors for unchecked virus transmission. Staff and student health and safety must be prioritised.

• Oppose the militarisation of education. End all victimisations of educators and students who oppose genocide and war.

• Initiate a high-quality school construction program in working-class communities. No public funds for elite private schools; invest billions in public education for a free, first-class education for all.

The struggle for decent public education, as well as healthcare and other fundamental social rights, clashes at every step with the diktats of big business and finance capital.

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 schools and encourage you to contact the CFPE to discuss this perspective.

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout



To contact the WWSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsw.org/contact