

Increasing violence in Australian public schools

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Join the online meeting of the Committee for Public Education (CPFE), "Build rank and file committees, oppose the accelerating assault on public education!" this Sunday March 23, 11 a.m. AEDT. Click here to register.

Educators and students in Australia's public schools are experiencing a sharp rise in violence. Although media coverage often tends to sensationalise the most extreme incidents, longer-term data highlights a growing and alarming trend, reflecting deeper economic, social and political issues.

Incidents have included students violently assaulting their peers, bullying, sexual harassment, school suspensions, and students and parents confronting and assaulting teachers and principals.

In the country's most populous state, for example, the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education recorded 1,517 assaults in schools in 2023, up from 843 in 2022. Incidents involving weapons increased from 241 in 2022 to 728 in 2023. In the same year, the police were called to schools almost 20,000 times, including for weapons-related incidents, 66 of which involved a knife, sword, scissors or screwdriver, while 7 involved a pistol or a shotgun.

This has created unsafe and toxic school environments, negatively affecting the physical and emotional well-being of both students and educators. As a result, there has been a rise in students refusing to attend schools, school lockdowns and teachers leaving the profession further deepening the crisis in public education.

The Australian Catholic University's 2023 *The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey* reported that violence directed at school leaders and teachers has increased markedly. When the survey began in 2011, of the 2,005 principals interviewed, 760 reported threats of violence (37.9 percent) and 547 reported physical violence (27.3 percent). In 2023, with 2,307 principals interviewed, 1,243 experienced threats of violence (54 percent) and 1,112 experienced physical violence (48 percent). More than half of the school leaders interviewed indicated they often seriously consider leaving their jobs due to workplace violence and stress.

A 2024 Monash University of Education study, *Australian Teachers' Perceptions of Safety, Violence and Limited Support in Their Workplaces* reported similar results. The study, published in the *Journal of School Violence*, surveyed over 8,200 teachers in 2019 and 2022. The number of teachers feeling unsafe at work rose from 19 percent in 2019 to 24.5 percent in 2022. Primary sources of safety concerns included aggressive behaviours from students and parents, coupled with a perceived lack of support from school leadership and educational systems.

A comment from a teacher quoted in the Monash study report provided an insight into the seriousness and complexity of some of the related issues confronted by educators:

The classroom and a school are unpredictable places these days.

I have had experiences of students walking into my classroom having slit their wrists, I have dealt with a student attempting to jump from the building, I have faced disclosures of rape and teen pregnancy. I have had to mitigate family violence, peer violence, and volatile parents. I have had to apologize to students and parents for managing my classroom. No one has ever asked after these events if I am ok or followed up with me. I've managed other staff breaking down or looking to me for support. Most of the reason I need [to] seek private therapy is because of work. I am not ok.

This testimony underscores the often overwhelming mental and emotional strain placed on educators, who are forced to handle both academic responsibilities and serious challenges within their classrooms. As schools, particularly public schools, reflect the broader problems in society, working on the frontlines of the social crisis, teachers are left to manage difficult student crises and growing economic disadvantage, striving to create a safe and supportive learning environment—without the necessary training or resources.

What the media covers up is the deeper systemic issues fuelling this development and the inadequate support in schools and society at large. A serious analysis of school violence must consider its roots in the broader social crisis under capitalism, involving intensifying social inequality, the impoverishment of entire communities, and the normalisation of violence.

The seemingly knee-jerk response from the media and governments consists of a punitive approach, as implemented by the state Labor government in NSW, where schools can increase the length of student suspensions without necessary approval from the Education Department and are introducing programs where police attend schools on a weekly basis. In Victoria, that state's Labor government has given schools the right to ban some parents from school grounds and from contacting teachers.

Economic distress

Working-class families are increasingly struggling to survive and make ends meet. Economic factors, particularly the soaring cost of living, higher interest rates, rising rents and real wage cuts, are leading to increasing poverty and financial strain.

Many students and parents facing financial hardships necessarily have feelings of frustration and anger. Surviving from one day to the next leads to stress within families, which can spill over to the school environment. Students who experience food insecurity, unstable housing, or lack of access to basic necessities struggle to focus on education and can

sometimes resort to disruptive or violent behaviours as coping mechanisms.

Child poverty is rising in Australia, with 823,000 children (14.5 percent) below the poverty line in 2022—an increase of 102,000 from 2021. A Foodbank Australia report found nearly a million households are struggling to afford food, with parents skipping meals to protect their children. Severe food insecurity affects 870,000 households on incomes of less than \$30,000 annually, up 5 percent from 2022, with single-parent families hardest hit.

Public schools have a grossly disproportionate number of students from disadvantaged and low socio-economic backgrounds. They enrol 80 percent of students deemed disadvantaged, 80 percent of low SES (socioeconomic status), 84 percent of indigenous, 86 percent of extensive disability and 82 percent of remote area students.

A recent research paper 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 other private schools.

This is contributing to an accelerating transfer of students to lavishly-funded private schools, while public schools remain starved of basic resources. More than 40 percent of secondary students are now in private schools.

Public schools are shouldering the weight of the social crisis. Teachers are overwhelmed, understaffed and have unsustainable workloads, driving many experienced educators out of the profession. Staffing shortages have exacerbated tensions within the schools, with classes cancelled and merged, and class sizes increased. Yet, the resources to support students suffering social disadvantage and mental health struggles are woefully inadequate.

The shortage of mental health resources and school psychologists is particularly alarming. The Australian Psychological Society (APS) recommends a ratio of one psychologist per 500 students, requiring more than 8,000 professionals nationwide. However, current estimates indicate just one per 1,500 students.

Access to child psychological services is severely delayed. Wait times for private psychologists averaged 34 days in 2019. By 2022, adolescents faced an average 94-day wait for mental health treatment. In regional areas like Western Australia's Pilbara, wait times stretched to 344 days. Even the ratios proposed by APS go nowhere near dealing with the shortage.

Such appalling conditions are the responsibility of successive Labor and Liberal-National governments, federal and state. The federal Albanese Labor government and state Labor governments are channelling millions of dollars into the private school system at the expense of public education.

Alongside budget cuts to public education, the Australian Education Union (AEU) and its state and territory affiliates have rammed through workplace agreements that have systematically cut wages in real terms and worsened conditions. Despite this record, the AEU has repeatedly sought to defuse educators' anger by channelling opposition behind the Labor Party's federal and state election campaigns, falsely claiming Labor to be a "lesser evil."

Despite the teacher unions being fully aware of the escalating violence, their response, as typified by an Australian Capital Territory (ACT) AEU "Violence in Schools" position paper, is limited to advising members to develop individual behavioural management plans for students and seek training on behavioural classroom management. The union officials also advise educators to report violent incidents using official departmental channels, seek medical attention, consider lodging compensation claims and access counselling services, such as Employee Assistance Programs, for support. They also suggest contacting police if needed.

Normalisation of violence and war

These conditions have been compounded by the imposition of a regime of standardised testing and other regressive programs. The curriculum has been narrowed through the sidelining of history, music, the arts and programs promoting critical thinking.

At the same time, the world beyond the classrooms and playgrounds is exploding in ongoing war and genocide, and with political bullying normalised at the highest levels of government.

A student born in 2008 has grown up in a world shaped by economic breakdown, intensifying social inequality, environmental catastrophes and military conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Ukraine and Gaza, with growing threats of nuclear retaliation and a third world war. The horrific Gaza genocide, with the daily murder of women and children through bombing and starvation, the demolition of schools and universities and cultural erasure, highlights the global ruling elite's complete disregard for the lives of ordinary people.

This murderous contempt also has been displayed in the COVID-19 pandemic, with close to 30 million people senselessly dying since 2020. The criminal thinking and neglect of the ruling class was summed up by the then British Prime Minister Boris Johnson who stated in the midst of mass death, "let the bodies pile high."

A culture of violence, brutality, nationalism and social backwardness is both celebrated and normalised, epitomised by figures like Donald Trump and Elon Musk. War criminals such as Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu are protected. Gratuitous violence, including torture, is communicated through the media, movies, the entertainment business and social media—permeating every pore of official society. Such violence aims to desensitise and brutalise individuals.

The multi-billion IT companies consciously create addictive gaming experiences that can harm young people's mental health and behaviour. Many games promote war, violence and aggression, desensitising players to real-world consequences, while reinforcing dopamine-driven engagement loops. While games may not directly cause violence, research shows they can cause aggression and reduce empathy, especially in vulnerable youth.

Militarism is increasingly promoted in primary and secondary schools, with students steered toward defence industry careers—a clear goal of the Labor administrations. Major weapons manufacturers and the Department of Defence shape curricula, especially in STEM, seeking to create a steady pipeline of students to support the war effort.

The same governments insist that there is not enough money for decent education, mental health services, basic health care and social safety nets, while hundreds of billions of dollars are channelled to fund war and war preparations—where the rich also profit off the exploitation of the working class. It is not difficult to see how thousands of students and families, frustrated and alienated, betrayed over decades by the Labor and the unions, feel powerless in dealing with the situation, left to deal with the situation as individuals, and can mistakenly respond through violent outbursts.

To defeat the betrayals of the Labor and union apparatuses, new organisations must be built, completely independent 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—with supportive parents and students, providing democratic forums to exchange information and discuss what needs to be done, developing a program of action.

Above all, in seeking a way forward, educators and students must trace school violence to its root, to the conditions that produce violence—social inequality, poverty, war and the capitalist profit system itself. The source of all the fundamental problems lies in the social structure and political

system of capitalism. Therefore, it must be overthrown. The basis for doing so is the building of a socialist political leadership in the working class. Educators, students and young people must channel their anger, passion and energy into building this movement.

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