Australia: Educators rally against Victorian Labor government's school funding cut

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Victorian teachers and education support staff rallied outside the office of state Education Minister Ben Carroll last week, to protest against the Labor government's funding cut to public schools.

In a major attack on public education, the state Labor government of Premier Jacinta Allan secretly slashed more than $2.4 billion in promised school funding over the next six years.

The cuts also impact federal funding arrangements, which are matched to the state allocation. That brings the total withdrawal of desperately needed school funding to $3 billion.

Underscoring its contempt for educators and students, and the working class more broadly, the government attempted to hide its cuts.

The government's Budget and Finance Committee—the premier, treasurer and three senior ministers, including the education minister—met in March 2024 and decided to postpone pledged school funding by three years, from 2028 to 2031. The "savings" were concealed within last year's budget documents.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) held last week's protest after school hours, but hundreds of educators made every effort to attend the rally from primary and secondary schools across Melbourne. Many held home-made placards and were eager to express their anger and frustration at their appalling working conditions, and the lack of staff and much-needed resources.

Rather than mounting a genuine fight against Labor's funding cuts, however, the AEU is seeking to divert educators into toothless appeals to members of parliament, a proposed Greens-led parliamentary inquiry and symbolic gestures like wearing red T-shirts promoting the union.

AEU leaders are urging school workers to write to local MPs and plead for a policy reversal. This dead end, pushed by the union many times before, serves to demobilise teachers and direct them to fawning and impotent appeals to the very politicians responsible for the assault on education.

Justin Mullaly, the AEU state branch president, called for the government to "fix your funding mess now. We have this problem because of active decisions of the government."

Contrary to Mullaly, the Allan government's cuts are not an aberration or an accident. They are a deepening of decades of underfunding to public education, presided over by successive governments at the state and federal levels, Labor and Liberal alike.

This offensive has deliberately created a two-tier educational system that is semi-privatised and socially segregated. Students from privileged backgrounds attend lavish private schools, that continue to receive substantial public funding.

Meanwhile, public schools are overcrowded, under-resourced and filled with students from low socio-economic backgrounds at nearly twice the rate of Catholic schools and almost triple that of independent schools.

While Mullaly pointed to government budget cuts, the dire conditions in public schools are also the result of the AEU's long-standing alliance with the Labor Party, which it has backed as the "lesser evil" in every election. For decades, in partnership with Labor, the AEU has imposed sell-out agreements by anti-democratic means, leaving Victorian public schools the lowest funded and educators the lowest paid nationally.

Mullaly praised the Greens' call for a parliamentary inquiry, saying it was "a really good move." In reality, a committee would take a year to produce a report that would not reverse the cut.

Desperate to maintain illusions in Labor, Mullaly called on teachers to pass sub-branch resolutions and write letters of protest to local Labor MPs and tell them what

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"they are doing is wrong."

The AEU has long refused to mobilise teachers against the assault on public education. Since the election of the state Labor government in 2014, the AEU has organised no strike action.

The last industrial action was over a decade ago, in 2013, when three one-day strikes were held against a Liberal government. Those strikes were among the largest ever by Victorian teachers, but the AEU channelled that movement behind the return of a Labor government.

In 2017, the AEU pushed through an agreement with the Labor government without mass meetings. The same occurred in 2022, when the biggest sellout deal was rammed through using union misinformation and censorship, despite substantial educator opposition.

In December 2021, 97 percent of teachers had voted for industrial action, but the AEU refused to call a strike. Instead, it pushed through an agreement that saw base wages rise by less than 2 percent a year, far below the inflation rate, let alone the real hikes in the cost of living, and that did nothing to mitigate untenable workloads and onerous working conditions.

Such was the depth of opposition to the 2022 AEU-Labor sell-out that thousands of teachers resigned from the union in disgust.

Using the rally as a union recruitment drive, Mullaly urged teachers to sign up new members, declaring that too many of their colleagues were "getting a free ride." He framed this in the context of the union's "fantastic log of claims," soon to be presented, and upcoming negotiations with the government.

Mullaly said that in Term 3, "we will be rallying again… doing everything we can to push the government to deliver fair funding."

This is empty rhetoric from Mullaly—on a salary exceeding $250,000. Both new and experienced educators should be warned. The union is again steering a familiar course as it enters negotiations with the Labor government. As in 2022, talks will occur behind closed doors, with the union attempting to impose yet another agreement that does little—beyond a few crumbs—to address the dire wages and conditions in public schools.

Last month, Premier Jacinta Allan's government released its state budget, projecting debt to reach $194 billion within three years. It signalled deeper cuts to wages, conditions and essential services. Treasurer Jaclyn Symes admitted that up to 3,000 public sector jobs faced elimination, with more likely after a review. Public sector workers, including those in schools and healthcare, face further real wage cuts.

At last week's rally, Committee for Public Education (CFPE) members distributed hundreds of copies of a statement outlining a clear analysis of the cuts and a way forward—calling for the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the AEU and other unions.

The CFPE, the educators' rank-and-file network, was the only organisation to advance a program and perspective to fight the assault on public education, while the pseudo-left groups remained silent, trying to protect the AEU bureaucracy.

The CFPE statement outlined a series of demands on wages, workload, staffing, class sizes, resources, support staff and funding. It stated:

> Teachers, school staff, and working-class families seeking to fight the cuts cannot do so through the AEU, the Greens, nor the fake left organisations who claim the union can be "democratised" and the union bureaucracy pressured into taking militant action against the government. What is required is the formation of rank-and-file committees in every school, unifying staff, students, and communities, in an independent political and industrial struggle against the state and federal Labor governments. The fight to overturn the $3 billion funding cut must be taken forward as part of a broader struggle for a properly funded public school system, within which teachers and school staff enjoy decent wages and conditions.

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
Facebook: facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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