

Australia: Kindergarten teachers take industrial action, but union seeks a deal

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Kindergarten teachers in the Australian state of Victoria took strike action for the first time in 11 years on September 16 over pay and conditions. More than 1,000 educators from community kindergartens marched on parliament house, demanding a 35 percent wage rise over three years and protesting against the refusal of the state Labor government to even make a pay offer.

Since then, however, the trade union covering the educators, the Australian Education Union (AEU), has held back any further action. This week it announced limited bans on overtime and the preparation of transition to school statements for students commencing primary school next year.

AEU state branch president Justin Mullaly said the union would only consider further stopwork action if the government's "failures" continued. This is another warning of preparations by the union bureaucrats to do a sellout deal with the government, as it did to Victoria's public school teachers in 2022.

Last month, in an interview on radio 3AW, Mullaly was questioned about the 35 percent pay claim. He said it was the union's job to put forward what the teachers thought they were worth, "but the thing I really want the government to do is to put a pay offer itself... put something on the table that we can negotiate around."

In other words, the union is appealing to the government to collaborate in working out and enforcing an agreement that would resolve nothing for early childhood educators.

The Victorian Early Childhood Teachers and Educators Agreement expired in September 2024. It is formally an agreement between Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA), which represents some 400 employers, and the AEU. But the state government is directly responsible as the funder of the salaries.

The educators covered by the agreement have not received a pay rise since April 2024, almost 18 months ago, yet the government has denied any responsibility for the delay. The educators are also demanding a reduction in excessive workloads, including onerous administration tasks, and more planning time.

Early childhood educators are amongst the lowest paid sections of the working class in Australia, have crushing workloads and, as a result, the sector is experiencing significant staff shortages.

Despite having university degrees that are equivalent to teaching degrees, early childhood teachers are paid even worse than their primary and secondary school colleagues in Victoria. Entry-level educators earn at least \$10,000 per annum less than public primary school teachers.

In 2022 the Labor government promised to fund kindergarten education to 15 hours a week for three-year-olds and 30 hours a week for four-year-olds. However, that would require 11,000 additional teachers and educators.

A recent AEU survey of 1,182 Victorian kindergarten educators showed that 48 percent of teachers were always or often thinking about leaving the early childhood profession. Teachers reported that they were working almost 6.6 hours unpaid overtime each week.

A teacher who took strike action and attended the September 16 rally told the WSWs her main concern was the conditions. "We are always short of staff, especially trained staff, and there is so much paperwork," she said.

She explained that she only had two staff to look after 21 children and only one of them was trained as an early childhood teacher—the other had a diploma qualification. She had recently moved to Melbourne from New Zealand, where she said the pay was better

and she felt more supported by the employer and parents.

A Facebook site that reported on the strike had many comments of support for the striking teachers. One educator wrote: “I am an early childhood worker, and diploma trained. Our wages are terrible. I could work at Woolworths for more an hour with a lot less responsibility and paperwork.”

Another commented: “It is an absolute disgrace what early years teachers get paid. They have to do the same level of education (Bachelors degree) with all the hard work and HECS [fees] debt that goes with it... and they are expected to live on a wage that essentially leaves them below the poverty line!”

The AEU has a track record of calling short stoppages and limited work bans, all tactics to stifle opposition by allowing workers to let off steam, while retaining strict control.

The union has signed one sell-out industrial agreement after another, pushing through below-inflation pay deals and ensuring that conditions deteriorate. Before the previous AEU agreement for kindergarten teachers, which was finally ratified in July 2021, they had not had a pay rise since August 2018.

The first pay rise negotiated in the 2021 agreement was back dated to October 2020, but not paid until October 2021. The total quantum was 12.6 percent over the almost six years between the 2018 pay rise and the final one in April 2024.

From the date the agreement was ratified in 2021 until its nominal end date in September 2024, inflation in Australia has been above 2.8 percent, peaking at 7.8 percent in December 2022, so educators’ pay has been cut significantly in real terms.

In 2022, the AEU pushed through an agreement for Victoria’s public teachers 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.

The only alternative is for early childhood educators to take matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees, independent of the AEU and other unions.

These committees could unite teachers across the

country and internationally, together with other workers, such as the nurses, raising demands based on what educators need, determined through a democratic discussion. These demands could include an end to unpaid overtime, and the hiring of tens of thousands of new teachers with decent pay and conditions.

Public sector workers, including those in schools and healthcare, face further real wage cuts.

In May, Premier Jacinta Allan’s state government released its 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.

In June, Victorian teachers and education support staff rallied outside the office of state Education Minister Ben Carroll to protest against the Labor government secretly slashing more than \$2.4 billion in promised school funding over the next six years.

Rank-and-file committees are needed throughout the public sector, and the rest of the working class, to halt this assault and fight for first-class public education at all levels, with decent pay and conditions.

This means a political struggle against Labor, the Liberal-Nationals, the union apparatuses and the capitalist profit system that they all defend.



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