

# Australian teachers fight wage cuts and austerity demands

Sue Phillips  
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Public school teachers in the island state of Tasmania joined rolling strikes over stagnant pay and intolerable working conditions this week. This is another indication of intensifying discontent among educators and other public sector workers nationally.

The stoppages came after Queensland teachers recently held their first strike in 16 years and then this week voted down overwhelmingly a state government pay cut “offer.” Victorian kindergarten educators recently struck for the first time in more than a decade.

In every case, under Labor and Liberal-National governments alike, educators are confronting below-inflation wage offers, lack of resources, intolerable workloads and a staffing crisis that is driving thousands out of the profession.

Other Tasmanian public sector workers, including health workers and firefighters, also participated in this week’s rolling stoppages, showing the potential for a unified fight against the austerity agenda.

The anger is erupting despite the efforts of the trade union apparatuses to contain and halt strike action.

On Thursday, after a rally of more than 1,000 workers in Hobart, the Tasmanian capital, Australian Education Union (AEU) Tasmanian president David Genford declared there would be no further strike action, supposedly so that Year 11 and 12 exams would not be disrupted.

Genford said the union wanted the state Liberal government to “come back to the table” to discuss “meaningful change,” rather than focus on pay alone. This is a familiar pattern. Union leaders shut down action and enter into closed-door negotiations to prepare another sellout.

However, the union bureaucrats are having growing difficulties in doing so, due to the level of unrest among workers.

The Queensland teachers voted by 67.6 percent to reject a union–state Liberal-National Party government sellout agreement that offered a nominal 8 percent pay rise over three years. That was a real wage cut compared to the latest inflation figures, showing prices resurging by an annual rate

of 5.2 percent in the September quarter, and higher for necessities.

Despite the Queensland Teachers Union (QTU) trying to ram the deal through by telling teachers that the only alternative was a protracted arbitration process, the ballot saw the highest participation in such a vote in the union’s 136-year history.

Similar opposition is developing in Victoria. Following an extraordinary 700-plus branch submissions on its current log of claims, the AEU leadership has been pushed into saying it is asking the state Labor government for a 35 percent wage rise over three years, smaller class sizes and reduced face-to-face teaching hours.

This directly conflicts with the record of the AEU bureaucracy, which in 2022 pushed through a nominal annual wage rise of less than 2 percent and claimed it as a “victory.”

The AEU leadership has no intention of fighting for these demands in Victoria or anywhere else. It is raising them to placate and mislead teachers, while preparing another sellout.

Across the country, educators want to fight. Yet in every state and territory, they are being kept isolated by the union leaderships, which oppose any unified national action. These bureaucracies have been centrally involved in enforcing worsening conditions on behalf of state and federal governments—a process that has accelerated under the Albanese federal Labor government since 2022.

The Tasmanian teachers’ stoppages involved staggered actions across the state, temporarily closing public schools each morning on designated regional days, with schools resuming at 11:30 a.m.

The stoppages were directed against the state government’s refusal to agree on a new enterprise agreement. Its “final” offer was a 3 percent wage rise for one year, with further negotiations deferred. The government claimed the offer was “fair and affordable,” despite the continuing cost-of-living crisis.

Under pressure from teachers, the AEU leadership rejected

the offer as “insulting.” Its log of claims requested a 21.5 percent rise over three years, starting with 11 percent in the first year, to address recruitment and retention problems and move Tasmanian teachers toward parity with mainland states. Tasmanian teachers presently earn between \$74,783 and \$114, 857, depending on experience and qualifications.

Anger has been intensified by the contrast between the government’s 3 percent offer and a recent 22 percent pay rise for state parliamentarians.

As is the case nationally, the Tasmanian dispute is not only about pay but the deteriorating conditions—excessive administrative work, overcrowded classes and a severe lack of support for students with complex needs. This is driving teacher burnout, resignations and staff shortages, creating an escalating crisis in public education.

Teachers describe classrooms containing students on the autism spectrum, in psychological care, or experiencing family violence and trauma, yet with little or no assistance. One teacher at a stop-work rally spoke of letting down students by spending hours outside of paid time “catching up on emails, doing well-being referrals, checking attendance and following up with parents.”

Teachers have reported the impossibility of managing classes of 30 or more where many students require individual learning plans. Classroom violence is cited repeatedly as a key issue. There are demands for year-round employment for teaching assistants, who are currently stood down without pay during school holidays, undermining retention of staff working with the most vulnerable students.

A Tasmanian teacher wrote on social media: “The biggest issue is that this offer has nothing in terms of workload reduction, teacher safety, or anything else beyond pay. Teachers here can be asked to attend 100 hours of after-school meetings per year and do 28 hours of unpaid work. Reducing these would greatly improve conditions at no cost to the government.”

Other unions participated in this week’s staggered stop-work actions, including the Health and Community Services Union (HACSU), the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), the United Workers Union (UWU) and the United Firefighters Union (UFU). There is opposition among the state’s essential workers, particularly over the pittance of a 3 percent pay offer. Healthcare workers, like teachers, face severe recruitment and retention issues, leading to low staffing levels and overwhelming stress.

In July, 50,000 Queensland school teachers joined the largest strike in the state’s history after rejecting the below-inflation deal. The QTU quickly moved to end the dispute and entered talks that produced the latest sellout proposal.

A similar straitjacketing of educators unfolded in Victoria in September, where kindergarten teachers held their first

strike in more than a decade, demanding a 35 percent wage rise and relief from punishing workloads. The AEU imposed token work bans to contain the struggle.

The industrial action in Tasmania is developing amid a deep political and economic crisis. Following the July state election—the fourth in seven years—Tasmania still has a hung parliament. Labor’s vote collapsed to 25.9 percent, its lowest in over a century, reflecting the shattering of its former working-class base.

Labor’s decline was accelerated by its right-wing, pro-business campaign, pledging \$1 billion in cuts over four years. Labor leader Dean Winter actively sought corporate support for a minority government structured around austerity.

A pre-election Treasury report projected state debt rising from \$4.2 billion in 2024–25 to \$13 billion in 2027–28, warning that without “decisive policy interventions” Tasmania’s ability to fund essential community services would be severely challenged.

The Murdoch media has demanded cutting government spending by 25 percent, increasing state taxes by 250 percent, or slashing 20,700 of the state’s 33,200 public servants.

Tasmanian educators, like their counterparts nationally, are fighting decades of union-enforced sellouts that have left public schools underfunded and staff overwhelmed. Teachers are going into battle with their hands tied behind their backs. The perspective of the unions is to appeal to governments, Labor and Liberal-National, that have already declared their agenda is budget cuts.

To win decent pay and conditions for teachers and students, educators must establish new organisations of struggle—rank-and-file committees, democratically run by educators and independent of the union bureaucracies. A network of committees must be formed to link up nationally, including with other public sector workers, to fight for demands based on real social need, not what capitalist governments or union leaderships deem “affordable.”

For further information, contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators’ network.

#### **Contact the CFPE**

Email: [cfpe.aus@gmail.com](mailto:cfpe.aus@gmail.com)

Facebook: [facebook.com/commforpubliceducation](https://facebook.com/commforpubliceducation)

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



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