

The crisis in Australian public education and the need for rank-and-file committees

Committee for Public Education**6 February 2026**

Educators and students begin the 2026 school year amid profound global upheaval. Escalating authoritarianism, militarism and social breakdown are reshaping political life internationally, with far-reaching consequences for education systems and the future confronting young people.

Developments in the first month of 2026 alone, including the criminal invasion of Venezuela and kidnapping of President Maduro and threats against Greenland and Iran, accompanied by the Gestapo-style killings of protesters by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents in Minneapolis, have brought these processes sharply into focus.

Political events in the United States under the fascistic Trump administration, desperate to retain its central power within the global capitalist order, have laid bare the accelerating erosion of democratic norms and rule by oligarchs. This is provoking growing resistance from below. The general strike movement in Minneapolis reflects opposition across the US and internationally.

In Australia the year opens with educators confronting intolerable and socially destructive conditions. These are not the product of isolated policy failures, poor management or temporary budget pressures. They are the outcome of a long-term assault on public education, now led by the Albanese Labor government in collaboration with state governments, and enforced by the education union bureaucrats.

Across the country, schools are buckling under chronic underfunding, staff shortages, impossible workloads and rising levels of violence and distress. Teachers' wages, like those of all sections of the working class, continue to fall behind inflation, burnout is endemic, and experienced educators are leaving the profession in record numbers. Many graduates never enter teaching or leave within five years. Education support staff are stretched to breaking point, students with complex needs go without assistance, and classrooms increasingly function as sites of crisis management rather than education.

According to the latest OECD data, Australian teachers work an average of 46.5 hours per week, well above the OECD norm, with much of this time consumed by administrative, marking and preparation tasks. Nearly two-thirds report high levels of stress, and more than 80 percent say their work harms their mental health. The problems are most severe in disadvantaged working-class schools, where almost 67 percent of principals report staffing shortages.

A major study, *The Silent Cost: Impact and Management of Secondary Trauma in Educators*, drawing on surveys of nearly 2,300 educators, found that teachers, described as the "social workers of society," experience secondary traumatic stress (STS) at levels higher than psychologists, mental health nurses and paramedics. That reflects the prolonged, emotionally intensive teacher-student relationship and the expanding demands placed on educators in chronically under-resourced schools.

These conditions flow directly from successive governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, eroding public education. The Albanese government has continued to funnel billions of dollars into elite private

schools.

Governments have used the so-called needs-based Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) to massively overfund private schools, while public schools remain underfunded by billions. In 2025, for example, it was revealed that two elite Victorian private schools, Haileybury College and Caulfield Grammar, spent a combined \$391.8 million on capital works between 2012 and 2022, more than the entire Tasmanian public school system, consisting of 190 public schools.

The ruling capitalist elite has deliberately constructed a semi-privatised and socially segregated education system, in which families are pressured into private enrolments as public education is systematically run down.

A Swinburne University study this year found that vulnerable families are often going without basic necessities to meet rising school costs. It reported that a child born in 2023 will cost \$108,870 to attend a metropolitan public school in Victoria from kindergarten to Year 12.

At the same time, vast sums are allocated to militarism. The AUKUS agreement alone commits Australia to spending hundreds of billions of dollars on nuclear-powered submarines and war preparations against China.

For years, this social counter-revolution has been policed by the education unions. In 2025, teachers in Queensland, Tasmania and Victoria entered struggle against poverty wages, intolerable workloads and unsafe schools. In every case, the unions intervened to block, delay or shut down action, deliberately fragmenting teachers along state and sectoral lines despite essentially identical conditions nationwide.

In Queensland, teachers took strike action for the first time in almost a decade, rejecting a state Liberal National Party government wage offer that entrenched real pay cuts. The Queensland Teachers Union soon shut down the dispute, diverting it into arbitration designed to dissipate opposition and impose below-inflation outcomes. In Tasmania, industrial action was limited to staggered half-day stoppages and morning walkouts before being wound down without securing any substantive gains.

In Victoria, the Australian Education Union (AEU) has for decades suppressed opposition. In 2022 it rammed through a wage-cutting agreement despite more than 40 percent of educators voting no, leaving Victorian teachers on the lowest wages nationally. Negotiations reopened in 2025 amid mounting anger, reflected in more than 700 sub-branch submissions. The union's log of claims, including a 35 percent wage increase over three years, allows AEU bureaucrats to posture as militant while funnelling teachers into tightly controlled, non-disruptive actions before imposing a sellout under the pretext of "budgetary restraints." This coincided with revelations that the state Labor government secretly withheld \$2.4 billion from public schools. Amid fears that opposition may break out of its control, the bureaucracy has called a ballot for limited industrial action.

The unions function not as organisations of struggle but as industrial police for governments and corporate interests. Privileged bureaucrats, many earning around a quarter of a million dollars a year—more than

double the average teacher's wage—enforce government cuts by isolating disputes, suppressing rank-and-file action and politically aligning with the parties implementing austerity.

The assault on public education is part of a broader international offensive rooted in the deepening crisis of capitalism. This has taken its sharpest form under the Trump administration through historic funding cuts, mass layoffs, censorship, book bans and the imposition of a mandated “patriotic curriculum,” rewriting American history. Schools are being transformed into instruments of ideological control. These attacks are inseparable from wider repression, provoking powerful working-class opposition across the US, including mass protests and student-led walkouts against ICE in Minneapolis and beyond.

Similar issues are posed in Australia. In the aftermath of the Bondi massacre, the Albanese government established an “Antisemitism Education Taskforce,” chaired by businessman David Gonski and Zionist corporate lawyer Jillian Segal, tasked with reviewing the Australian curriculum to reject “all forms of antisemitic thought and action.” Under the guise of combating hatred, this body poses a serious threat to democratic rights and academic freedom by equating political opposition, particularly to Israel’s genocide in Gaza, with antisemitism, providing a framework for censorship and repression in schools and universities. Alongside tougher “hate crime” laws, education institutions are to become frontline mechanisms of state control.

Fuelling this draconian agenda is the deepening crisis of Australia’s parliamentary system, marked by the implosion of the Liberal-National Coalition and the continuing erosion of support for Labor. With the traditional parties of the post-World War II period losing their capacity to contain mounting social discontent, sections of the capitalist establishment are turning toward authoritarian measures to suppress opposition and shore up their rule.

Combined with already dire conditions, these measures signal a shift toward greater surveillance, conformity and intimidation, particularly of teachers who encourage critical engagement with history, politics and social inequality. Overcrowding, inadequate mental-health support, rising student distress and violence are the domestic expression of a system that prioritises war, profit and repression over social need.

The same governments that insist there is “no money” for education allocate limitless funds to military expansion and tax concessions for the wealthy. This agenda is reinforced by the growing presence of defence-linked programs in schools, promoted through state and federal partnerships and sponsored by weapons manufacturers such as BAE Systems, SAAB and Lockheed Martin, which use STEM and “pathway” initiatives to integrate education into the needs of the arms industry.

Teachers cannot defend public education through the trade union structures. Experience demonstrates that these organisations are incapable of reform. Integrated into the state apparatus, they function to enforce austerity and militarism. Appeals by pseudo-left tendencies, such as Solidarity and Socialist Alternative, to “democratise” the unions or pressure Labor to “listen” only demoralise educators and trap them within the union straitjacket.

The central lesson is the necessity for new, genuinely democratic organisations of struggle. Power must return to the rank and file, uniting teachers and education support staff, union members and non-members alike, with parents and students.

Teachers must begin building rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and controlled by educators themselves. These committees can unite teachers across states and sectors, link internationally, and develop a political strategy that addresses the root causes of the crisis.

The resources exist to fully fund public education, ensure humane working conditions and provide every student with the support they need. What stands in the way is the capitalist profit system itself.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file

educators’ network, advances the following demands:

- An immediate 40 percent pay increase to make up for past losses, 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 the narrowing of the curriculum and 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 support staff member 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.
- 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 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 based on a socialist program. We collaborate with educator rank-and-file committees internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

We pledge every assistance to educators seeking to establish rank-and-file committees and encourage you to contact the CFPE.

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpeaus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: CFPE_Australia

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/oppouseaeusellout



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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