

Australia: Victorian educators' industrial action ballot opens—Vote yes but build rank-and-file committees to take the struggle forward

Committee for Public Education

15 February 2026

More than 45,000 Australian Education Union (AEU) members in Victoria—teachers, education support staff and principals in public schools—are being asked to vote in a protected industrial action ballot after seven months of AEU negotiations with the state Labor government headed by Premier Jacinta Allan. The ballot opens today and closes on March 12.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE)—the educators' rank-and-file network—urges educators to vote yes on the ballot, including for strike action, but we warn that the AEU bureaucracy is preparing another sellout deal, as it did in 2022 on the last enterprise agreement.

To prevent another betrayal, educators must establish democratically elected rank-and-file committees in every school to take the struggle forward. These committees must be independent of AEU officials, open to union and non-union staff alike, and accountable solely to their members.

Years of falling real wages, relentless workloads and chronic underfunding have driven thousands out of the profession. Educators are at breaking point, teaching overcrowded classes amid chronic staff shortages and without the resources needed to support student wellbeing and increasingly complex learning needs.

A yes vote would demonstrate educators' readiness to fight—something the union apparatus has suppressed for decades. The last major strike action, involving some of the largest mass meetings ever, took place in 2013, before the state Labor government took office in 2014.

The AEU leadership is calling on educators to authorise only limited actions, ranging from various work bans up to one-day stoppages. The union stresses that the ballot wording is intentionally broad, giving officials flexibility to apply pressure to the government "over time."

Last Friday, the AEU's Joint Primary and Secondary Council endorsed a 24-hour statewide stoppage for March 24, contingent on the ballot result. Announcing this action before the vote has commenced underscores both the depth of rank-and-file anger and the bureaucracy's determination to keep it within tightly controlled limits.

The AEU's 2025 log of claims calls for a 35 percent wage increase over four years, smaller classes, reduced workloads and expanded allied health and education support staffing.

The current four-year agreement, covering wages and conditions, expired in December, but no formal government offer has been put forward, and the government has already signalled a hard-line stance.

Last year, Allan pledged that Victoria would deliver its full share of Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) funding. It later emerged, however, that her government had secretly deferred full funding until 2031, effectively withholding \$2.4 billion from public schools.

In the latest AEU newsletter, union president Justin Mullaly claims the union is going "full throttle for improved pay and conditions." Such claims should be treated with contempt. Mullaly, who is paid between \$230,000 and \$250,000, has no intention of waging such a struggle. The crisis in schools is the result of repeated betrayals by the AEU.

In 2022, the AEU rammed through an enterprise agreement widely recognised by teachers as a sell-out. Opposition voices were suppressed. Critical posts were deleted from official social media platforms. Delegates' meetings were tightly stage-managed: officials enjoyed ample time to promote the agreement, while opponents were restricted to three-minute contributions. Members were presented with a fait accompli and warned that rejection would lead to uncertainty.

Despite this anti-democratic conduct, 40 percent of AEU members voted against the deal, which imposed real pay cuts—2 percent rises when inflation was heading to more than 7 percent—did nothing to address the staffing crisis and offered a pittance on the workloads.

The objective basis had existed for a coordinated, national fight. In December 2021, Victorian educators reportedly voted by an overwhelming margin, around 97 percent, in favour of industrial action. In New South Wales, teachers were already taking action. South Australian educators were preparing to strike over COVID safety and deteriorating conditions.

Instead, the AEU bureaucrats did a deal with the state Labor

government, called off planned action and pushed educators into accepting an agreement that failed to address the fundamental issues. The opportunity for national unity was deliberately shut down.

This pattern continued last year with the union apparatus blocking unified action over expiring agreements in Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania, even though educators everywhere confront the same problems of falling real wages, exploding workloads and unsafe classrooms.

Industrial campaigns have been isolated, limited to protests and token stoppages, and channelled into arbitration or tightly controlled negotiations. The aim is to contain educator's anger, let off steam and preserve the union's relationship with state governments.

The present confrontation extends beyond wages and conditions. It is fundamentally political. The Allan government's move to delay full SRS funding until 2031 lays bare its agenda. Behind the backs of educators, parents and students, it took a budgetary decision not to spend the full education budget, to satisfy the money markets and their credit ratings agencies.

In recent months, Moody's has warned that Victoria must show "more restrained spending and sustained reform." S&P Global has stressed the need to curb operating costs and stabilise debt. In practice, this means cuts to public services and strict wage caps.

The resources to fully fund public education exist, but under the capitalist system they are subordinated to maintaining investor profits, servicing rising state debt and protecting financial markets, along with ever-increasing military expenditure.

Teachers cannot assume that the Allan government will retreat under industrial pressure. Nor is an election year likely to soften its stance. Labor governments, no less than Liberal administrations, are committed to the fiscal "discipline" demanded by the markets. In enforcing that discipline, they depend heavily on union bureaucracies to manage, contain and ultimately suppress opposition from below.

For decades, the trade union apparatuses have been transformed into instruments of industrial management. Officials seek to ensure that struggles remain within legally prescribed channels and do not develop into broader political confrontations.

For these reasons, the CFPE says: Vote yes, but treat the ballot as the opening of struggle, not its culmination. A strong "yes" vote can provide legal cover for action, but without an independent organisation, it can serve as a safety valve—allowing limited stoppages while negotiations continue behind closed doors.

Token measures have long been the union leadership's response, such as writing protest letters to the same Labor MPs driving the attacks, holding after-school rallies outside electorate offices, wearing red T-shirts, or refusing to answer emails after hours. Such gestures do nothing to halt the assault on educators.

A yes vote in the ballot is necessary. But only the conscious organisation of rank-and-file power, uniting educators across schools and states in a politically independent struggle, can secure the wages, conditions and funding that teachers and students need and require.

To translate a yes vote into a genuine fight:

- Immediately establish direct links across schools, regions and

states—including Queensland and Tasmania—to unify struggles around common demands and break the isolation that enables governments to divide and conquer.

- Formulate demands based on the needs of teachers and students, not budget dictates: inflation-indexed wage rises; substantial cuts to face-to-face teaching with guaranteed in-school planning time; enforceable class size limits; full special needs staffing; and properly funded support services.

- Build solidarity between parents, students and other public sector workers to widen the struggle.

- Demand full transparency: immediate publication of all government offers, comprehensive briefings to members and genuine debate before any vote. Reject back-room deals and insist that any agreement be decided through a fully informed democratic vote, including mass meetings.

The attack on public education forms part of a wider offensive against working people. Austerity, privatisation and increased military spending, involving hundreds of billions of dollars, are not isolated policies but interconnected elements of a global crisis of capitalism that is plunging into militarism, genocide and suppression of dissent.

Internationally, educators confront the same dynamic—unions that channel anger into tightly managed protests while capitalist governments escalate spending on the military, slash social services and tear up basic democratic rights.

The ballot must become the starting point for a unified, democratic movement of educators determined to take control of their struggle from the bureaucracy and place it in the hands of the rank and file.

The Victorian teachers' struggle must be linked to broader movements of workers, both nationally and internationally. Educators should reach out to colleagues in other states and connect with rank-and-file networks globally.

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

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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