

Australia: Early childhood educators in Victoria set to strike

Our reporters
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Early childhood teachers and educators across the Australian state of Victoria will strike on Thursday, as a deepening workforce and workload crisis continues to engulf the kindergarten sector.

The stoppage comes just weeks before the state's public school teachers and education support staff are due to join a 24-hour statewide stoppage on March 24, underscoring the discontent throughout the education system.

Yet the trade union covering both the school and early childhood educators, the Australian Education Union (AEU), is trying to keep the two struggles apart, in order to avoid a unified fight against the state Labor government and the financial interests it serves.

Despite a historic strike in September 2025—the first by kindergarten educators in more than a decade—the Victorian Labor government has still not put forward a pay offer. Negotiations have dragged on for more than 18 months since the Victorian Early Childhood Teachers and Educators Agreement expired in September 2024, leaving thousands of workers without a wage increase while living costs have continued to climb.

Educators remain trapped in a cycle of low pay, excessive workloads and chronic staff shortages. Many report working the equivalent of an unpaid day each week to complete planning, assessment and compliance tasks. These conditions are fuelling burnout and pushing large numbers to consider leaving the profession, exacerbating an already severe staffing crisis.

The AEU's log of claims for a new four-year agreement contains more than 60 items. Its demands include a wage rise of around 35 percent, stretched over four years, supposedly to bring kindergarten teacher pay closer to that of school teachers, limited measures to address severe workloads and administrative burdens, and some improvements to job security, career progression and conditions.

Additional claims raised by members include paid rest breaks, study and examination leave, stronger protections around out-of-hours work and improved penalty rates for

weekend duties. They also want the abolition of capability assessment requirements—formal competency evaluations used to judge performance against set criteria and determine progression to higher classification levels.

The breadth of these demands highlights the depth of dissatisfaction among educators and the entrenched structural problems facing the sector.

Since last September's stoppage, the AEU has largely limited the campaign to partial work bans, such as refusing unpaid overtime or certain administrative tasks. These measures have done nothing to shift the Labor government.

At the same time, Premier Jacinta Allan's government has pressed ahead with its Best Start, Best Life early-years changes, including expanded Free Kinder and extended Pre-Prep hours. These policies may significantly increase subsidised kindergarten access but have been implemented without addressing the underlying workforce crisis.

Official estimates indicate the expansion will require around 11,000 additional educators, even as the sector struggles to retain its existing workforce of around 15,000. Many educators warn that expanding services without improving pay and conditions will deepen shortages and undermine the quality and sustainability of programs.

This trajectory follows a broader pattern in early childhood policy. Governments present expansions in access as major public "investments," while shifting funding toward large not-for-profit providers, church-linked organisations or commercial operators. Similar dynamics have been observed internationally, including in Britain's Sure Start program, where centres initially promoted as universal public services were later outsourced, merged or closed.

In Victoria, municipal council-run kindergartens have progressively been transferred to non-government providers. Facilities built on public land have been leased to private operators. Educators are concerned that expansion without improvement in staffing and conditions will further entrench market-driven provision. Privatisation has seen the rise of dangerous conditions confronting parents and injuries to children.

An AEU “State of Our Kinders” survey of roughly 1,200 educators found about half were frequently considering leaving the profession due to low pay and excessive workloads. National research shows similarly alarming trends, with only a minority of early career educators confident they will remain in the sector long term.

Since the agreement’s expiry in September 2024, educators have effectively endured a pay freeze while inflation and housing costs have continued to rise. Typical starting salaries remain relatively low: about \$70,000 a year for diploma-qualified educators, around \$80,000 for degree-qualified staff, and roughly \$85,000 for kindergarten teachers.

During last September’s strike, around 1,200 educators marched on state parliament demanding substantial pay increases, reduced workloads and action on staffing shortages. Later a petition with more than 10,000 signatures backing these demands was delivered to state parliament, but the government has ignored the call.

The AEU has appealed to the government to return to negotiations, seeking a deal. The union bureaucrats want to keep the dispute tightly controlled within the union’s bargaining framework rather than mobilising the full collective strength of the workforce.

The union is keeping the early childhood educators separate from the more than 45,000 AEU members in Victoria—including school teachers, principals, education support staff and early childhood educators—who are voting in a protected industrial action ballot following months of negotiations with the state government. Before the ballot even commenced, the AEU announced a 24-hour stoppage for March 26, underscoring both the depth of rank-and-file anger and the union bureaucracy’s bid to keep it within tightly controlled limits.

The two stoppages highlight the objective basis for a unified struggle. Kindergarten educators and school workers confront the same fundamental issues—falling real wages, escalating workloads and chronic underfunding. Yet their disputes remain deliberately divided by separate bargaining processes and AEU-managed campaigns, amid an ongoing slashing of funds to public education.

The splitting of industrial action across sectors serves to dissipate workers’ anger and prevent a broader confrontation with the Labor government’s funding priorities. The Victorian government, like its counterparts nationally and internationally, is committed to satisfying the dictates of the financial markets, while billions of dollars are poured into AUKUS and other military preparations for war.

For the educators’ struggle to advance, they require new organisations of struggle—rank-and-file committees democratically controlled by workers themselves and

independent of the union apparatus. Such committees would enable kindergarten educators to link their fight with the tens of thousands of school workers now moving toward industrial action, transforming parallel disputes into a unified movement.

Through rank-and-file committees, educators could formulate demands based on what teachers, support staff and students actually need—substantial real wage increases, enforceable workload reductions, fully-funded staffing levels and a major expansion of genuine public education provision. These committees could coordinate action across workplaces, sectors and regions, overcoming the divisions imposed by separate bargaining structures.

A unified movement of educators would also connect with other sections of public sector workers confronting similar attacks, including health and community workers, broadening the struggle against austerity, budget cuts and the ongoing erosion of essential public services.

The February 26 strike thus poses a fundamental political question, who will determine the future of early childhood education—educators and the communities they serve, or governments and union bureaucracies enforcing austerity, militarism and pro-market restructuring?

Only the independent mobilisation of educators themselves, through rank-and-file committees (RFC) uniting workers across the education sector and beyond, can develop a genuine fight for a fully funded, high-quality public early childhood education system, with decent pay and working conditions.

To discuss these issues and how to form RFCs, please contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators’ network.

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

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