

# Australia: Victorian early childhood educators strike for second time

Estella Winters  
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Last Thursday about 1,500 early childhood educators marched in Melbourne—their second statewide 24-hour strike in five months—fighting poverty level wages, chronic understaffing, unpaid overtime and burdensome administrative work.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) called the limited strike amid mounting rank-and-file anger over the state Labor government's failure to present a wage offer after 20 months of negotiations.

Hundreds of early education workers from metropolitan regions were joined by hundreds of kindergarten teachers and assistant workers from regional centres, including Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong, Seymour and Warragul, forcing the closure of thousands of kindergartens.

Surveys show up to half of early childhood educators are frequently considering leaving the profession because workloads and pay are unsustainable. Some starting salaries are as low as \$70,000 a year. Workers are demanding reduced workloads and a 35 percent wage increase over four years.

This is similar to what Victorian primary and secondary teachers are demanding in their struggles, with a strike ballot underway and a one-day strike called for March 24. Yet the AEU is trying to keep these disputes limited and apart, in order to avoid a unified fight against the Labor government and the financial interests it serves.

The AEU motion passed at a Town Hall meeting called for further talks with the government and failed to put forward enforceable measures to solve the sector's chronic problems. It threatened further limited action, including a ban on work outside paid hours and the continuation of a media campaign. Similar measures in previous disputes have failed to secure substantial improvements.

After the Town Hall meeting, workers marched through the city centre to the state parliament house. Members and supporters of the SEP handed out hundreds of leaflets

calling for the formation of rank-and-file committees to organise a unified struggle with school educators.

Many educators made home-made placards that carried messages such as: "Professional Pay For Professional Work," "This System is Broken" and "We Teach The Future—Fund Us Like It."

The AEU's long collaboration with the Labor government has led to the crisis in early education. The previous AEU agreement for kindergarten teachers, ratified in July 2021, followed nearly three years without a pay rise. It delivered just a 12.6 percent increase between 2018 and 2024, while inflation surged well beyond that—peaking at 7.8 percent in December 2022. As a result, educators suffered a significant real wage cut.

In 2022, hundreds of school teachers resigned from the AEU after the union pushed through an agreement imposing nominal pay increases that were also far below the soaring cost of living. Workloads and class sizes stayed the same and managerial and performance monitoring increased.

An experienced kindergarten teacher from Melbourne told WSWs reporters during the march: "We're here to fight for what we have been asking for; respect, better pay, better conditions and we basically want to be heard... We are tired of officials telling us how to do our job and then not even acknowledging what we do."

Asked about the impact of recent childcare sexual abuse scandals in childcare centres, she was blunt: "They are the direct outcome of privatisation. The only way to keep children safe is better staffing ratios. It's not cameras, and it's not confiscating phones. The government needs to listen to the sector. We need resources, better conditions, and support for team members, children and families."

Premier Jacinta Allan's Labor government is deepening privatisations under the guise of expanding access. It is seeking to almost double the workforce when there are already massive shortages. To achieve this, funding would

likely be diverted away from local government services. Similar measures in other countries have relied heavily on market-driven funding models, further degrading services and entrenching privatisation.

During the march, an AEU official falsely accused the SEP of misinformation in its leaflet. He defended the union's refusal to organise a bigger strike by saying it was not the union dividing workers—it was the national Fair Work Act.

Union officials use legal constraints like the Fair Work Act, which bans strikes except during narrow union-controlled enterprise bargaining periods, to justify their sellouts of workers' struggles.

In reality, the union bureaucracies helped federal Labor governments draft and impose these laws, first under Rudd and Gillard in 2007–2013, and then Albanese since 2022, in order to straitjacket workers.

In the week leading up to the strike, Allan claimed the government had tabled an offer and urged the AEU to end the strike and continue negotiations. The *Herald Sun* reported a government claim of a 39.6 percent wage increase over four years and a pledge to achieve pay parity between early childhood and school educators. AEU state president Justin Mullaly, however, told media the government had not offered anything formally—only a position for further bargaining.

At the end of the march, Mullaly urged workers to keep chanting, claiming this would compel the premier to intervene and respect educators. He said the AEU would continue to put pressure on “every backbench member of this Labor government” to “understand in an election year what we are capable of” in order to deliver a deal that is about the “future of Victoria.”

This is typical rhetoric from union officials, invariably followed by closed-door negotiations which result in sellout agreements that reinforce government austerity agendas.

In Victoria, service cuts are being justified on the basis of a projected \$188 billion state debt, much of it accumulated through corporate subsidies during the acute phase of the COVID pandemic. That aligns with the federal Labor government's broader offensive against social spending while hundreds of billions of dollars are directed toward military expansion. This agenda underscores the fact that the crisis confronting educators is not accidental but is rooted in the priorities of the corporate profit-driven system.

The discontent of educators is increasing across Australia. In Queensland, 50,000 teachers walked off the

job last year and in Tasmania teachers went on staggered morning and half-day strikes disrupting classes across Hobart and other cities.

Similar struggles are erupting internationally. Teachers in New Zealand and the United Kingdom have struck over wages and staffing shortages. In San Francisco last month thousands of teachers joined their first major strike since 1979.

While these struggles reveal workers' readiness to fight, union leaderships everywhere have intervened to restrict their development and block the necessary unified challenge to the existing social order.

To transform mounting anger into an effective movement, educators must establish democratically elected rank-and-file committees (RFCs) in every kindergarten and school—independent of the union bureaucracy and accountable to mass meetings of workers.

These committees would draw up demands such as inflation-indexed wage increases, enforceable staffing ratios, guaranteed planning time and an end to privatisation. They would link up with parents and other public sector workers to prepare coordinated industrial action directed against both state and federal austerity measures.

The struggle for decent childcare and education is inseparable from the broader fight against austerity, privatisation and war. 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](mailto:cfpe.aus@gmail.com)

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

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