

South Australian election: Public education decays as billions funnelled into AUKUS war plans

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As the March 21 South Australian state election approaches, workers and young people are being presented with token promises of pittances for education, while they confront deteriorating public schools, chronic underfunding and intensifying attacks on wages and conditions.

At the same time, the federal and state Labor governments are pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into the AUKUS submarine program and other preparations for a war against China.

The scale of the education crisis is staggering. A recent government report admitted that 35 percent of all South Australian (SA) public school buildings are past their intended design life. Without a massive infusion of funds, this figure is projected to rise to 75 percent by 2052.

This is not a “challenge” created by COVID pandemic costs, as SA Education Minister Blair Boyer cynically claims, but the result of a decades-long bipartisan policy of starving public services to fund corporate subsidies and imperialist war operations.

What dominates is infrastructure decay and collapse. For working-class students, the learning environment consists of leaking roofs, asbestos-riddled walls and pervasive mould. There are 1,261 demountable or “transportable” classrooms littered across the state. Nearly 90 of these “temporary” shacks date back to the 1950s, with another 400 built in the 1960s, primarily located at country and regional schools. At Booleroo Centre District School, students are forced to learn in a structure built in 1950, a 76-year-old relic that should have been demolished decades ago.

Teachers report appalling conditions, including collapsed ceilings, broken air-conditioning, exposed wiring and rotting windows. In many schools, when it rains, staff must use buckets to catch water inside classrooms. These are not merely “maintenance issues.” They are a direct threat to the health and safety of students and staff. Yet, state Premier Peter Malinauskas’ Labor government insists there is “no silver bullet” and that workers must accept the “boundaries of what is possible.”

The “boundaries of what is possible” do not apply to the elite

private sector or the military-industrial complex. While public schools literally fall apart, billions of dollars continue to pour into wealthy private institutions. Over the decade to 2023, a \$3 billion capital infrastructure gap opened up between SA public and private schools.

In 2023 alone, the five highest-spending private schools in the state spent over \$83.1 million on capital works, including multimillion-dollar sports and arts centres. Mercedes College spent \$18.6 million (bolstered by \$10.4 million in federal funding), while Concordia College spent \$13.5 million (receiving \$11.5 million from the Albanese federal Labor government). In total, 94 private schools in SA receive more public funding than comparable public schools.

This two-tier system ensures that the children of the wealthy have modern facilities while working-class students are herded into unsafe and dilapidated environments.

The claim that there is “no money” for public education is a fraud. The Labor governments are committing unprecedented sums to the AUKUS pact, with the nuclear-powered submarine program alone projected to cost at least \$368 billion.

Last month, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese visited SA to promote the massive expansion of AUKUS military infrastructure, unveiling plans worth around \$30 billion for the expansion of the shipyard at Osborne in Adelaide, where at least eight nuclear-powered submarines are slated to be built.

Albanese announced that the federal government would make an initial \$3.9 billion “down payment” for the project. Construction is already underway on enabling works valued at \$2 billion, along with a \$5 billion submarine fabrication facility and a \$500 million Skills and Training Academy.

The AUKUS spending dwarfs anything proposed for public education. Just 1 percent of the projected \$368 billion submarine program—around \$3.7 billion—would exceed the entire four-year funding shortfall facing South Australian public schools, estimated at about \$1.8 billion and rising to more than \$3 billion over the decade.

By contrast, the state Labor government’s election commitments for education total only about \$250 million, offering no substantial increase in resources for schools. In fact,

the AUKUS program is roughly 1,400 times larger than Labor's new education spending in this election cycle.

The contrast underscores the class priorities of the political establishment: preparations for a US-led war against China take precedence over the education and future of the next generation. The Liberals have offered even less, a paltry \$120 million for maintenance.

Taking advantage of the chronic underfunding of public schools, military contractors and the Defence Department are embedding themselves in schools across SA, particularly in low-income regional and suburban areas.

Through outreach programs, placements, curriculum materials and teacher training—often backed by arms firms such as Saab, Lockheed Martin and BAE Systems—cash-strapped schools are increasingly being pushed to accept military industry initiatives.

Defence manufacturers and recruiters are brought into classrooms through STEM workshops, industry visits and work-experience placements tied to companies involved in the AUKUS submarine project at the Osborne shipyard.

These initiatives are already concentrated in working-class areas of Adelaide's northern suburbs where there is huge unemployment. Schools in districts such as Elizabeth, Salisbury and Playford have been targeted.

The crisis in public education has been compounded by decades of sellouts by the Australian Education Union (AEU) bureaucracy. Most recently, in late 2023 and early 2024 the union leadership pushed through a regressive enterprise agreement with the state Labor government that delivered another real wage cut for teachers while offering virtually nothing to address crushing workloads. Under the deal, teachers were told they would have to wait until 2029 for a single additional hour of non-instructional time to alleviate workloads and widespread burnout.

The agreement provided a nominal 4 percent pay rise followed by annual increases of 3 percent—well below inflation, which had exceeded 5 percent. Teachers were given just seven days at the end of the school year, exhausted and stressed, to review the agreement before the vote. The union suppressed opposition by warning that rejecting the deal would lead to prolonged arbitration. Only 68 percent of members participated in the ballot, and just 68 percent of those voted in favour—meaning fewer than half of all AEU members endorsed the agreement.

As a result of this latest sellout, thousands of students across the state still lack a consistent teacher, many educators are forced to teach outside their areas of expertise, and surveys indicate that nearly half of teachers are considering leaving the profession within the next five years.

The same pro-business and militarist agenda is being implemented in higher education through the Albanese government's Universities Accord—a blueprint to subordinate universities to the needs of the corporate elite and the military-

industrial complex.

The newly-created Adelaide University—a merger between the University of Adelaide and the University of South Australia championed by Premier Malinauskas—is being used to slash over 2,000 courses, gutting the humanities in favour of STEM programs aligned with “national security.”

The merged institution is pursuing deepening ties with weapons manufacturers like Saab to develop “sovereign combat systems” and “hypersonics.” Academic and professional staff report unmanageable workloads, burnout and the destruction of jobs through the non-renewal of fixed-term and casual contracts.

As in the schools, the university trade unions are complicit in Labor's restructuring, suppressing hostility to the merger and blocking a unified struggle across the country against the corporatisation and militarisation of education.

These experiences demonstrate that teachers, students and parents cannot place any faith in the Labor Party or the union bureaucracies, which function as enablers of the government's pro-war, pro-business agenda.

The fight for decent wages, fit-for-purpose facilities, and the right to high-quality free public education requires a political rebellion. The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) calls on all education workers to form new democratic organisations of struggle—independent rank-and-file committees—in every school, university and region.

Educators must unite with other sections of the working class, including nurses and healthcare workers, who face similar attacks on wages, conditions and living standards. The program of war and austerity must be rejected. The vast wealth accumulated by the billionaires must instead be expropriated and redirected to meet urgent social needs, from primary schools to universities.

The worsening conditions in SA schools and the pro-war restructuring of education are an indictment of a failed social order. The only solution is the fight for a socialist perspective that places social needs above the profits and war-drive of the capitalist class.

For discussion and assistance in forming rank-and-file committees, contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

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