

# Australia: Victorian educators at a crossroads—The March 24 strike and the case for rank-and-file committees

The Committee for Public Education  
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The proposed 24-hour statewide stoppage on March 24 marks a turning point for Victorian educators, many of whom will be taking strike action for the first time.

A ballot of Australian Education Union (AEU) members recorded an unprecedented 98 percent vote for stopwork action, expressing widespread anger over appalling wages and conditions in public schools.

While the AEU leadership has attempted to clothe itself in militant rhetoric, claiming it will go “full throttle” for a 35 percent wage increase, teachers must view these declarations with extreme distrust.

This strike—the first major industrial action since historic mass meetings in 2013—is being called by a trade union bureaucracy that has spent two decades suppressing opposition and enforcing the austerity dictates of the state Labor government, which has held office for 22 of the past 26 years. Significantly, union president Justin Mullaly has sat on the AEU executive throughout these decades of assault on public education.

The AEU bureaucracy is campaigning on the claim that Victorian teachers are the lowest paid and their schools the worst funded in the country. This is not an act of God or an unavoidable economic reality—it is the direct result of the union’s own complicity in Labor’s cuts. For decades, the AEU has functioned as an instrument of industrial management, ensuring educator anger is channelled into tokenistic activities, such as wearing red T-shirts or writing letters to MPs, while backroom deals entrench intolerable conditions.

The most recent and sharpest example was the 2022 Victorian Government Schools Agreement. This deal, which locked in real wage cuts during a period of soaring inflation, was rammed through using a calculated campaign of censorship and misinformation.

To understand the scale of the betrayal, one need only compare the AEU’s 2021 Log of Claims with the final outcome. In 2021, the union pledged to fight for a 7 percent annual wage rise, class size caps of 20 students and a reduction of face-to-face teaching to 18 hours. Instead, the 2022 agreement delivered a real wage cut. The union claimed a 2 percent annual increase, but the fine print revealed this was split into 1 percent instalments every six months, so the actual annual rise was only 1.5 percent, while inflation approached 7 percent and essential costs such as housing and food rose even faster.

There was also no cap on class sizes, while the promised workload relief amounted to a token concession under conditions where teachers routinely work around 12 hours of unpaid labour weekly, outside school hours.

When the draft agreement was first announced in February 2022, it

provoked an immediate outpouring of teacher anger. The AEU’s response was to delete hundreds of hostile comments from its official Facebook page and eventually disable comments altogether, falsely claiming dissent came from “trolls.” At tightly stage-managed delegates’ meetings, union officials—including Mullaly—were given unlimited time to promote the deal, while opponents were restricted to three-minute contributions.

Despite this anti-democratic barrage, nearly 40 percent of members voted against the agreement, a record level of opposition. In response to the sellout, thousands of educators resigned from the union in disgust.

Many educators have since rejoined in order to take strike action, hoping the union will finally address the conditions driving widespread burnout and forcing teachers out of the profession, creating a massive staffing crisis.

Only months after the 2022 agreement was ratified, the union’s complicity with the Labor government was displayed with extraordinary brazenness. At the AEU state conference in July that year, the union rolled out the red carpet for then Premier Daniel Andrews as the keynote speaker. Addressing the conference, Andrews thanked the union leadership, declaring: “The success and prosperity of the state rely on you.”

For teachers, however, this supposed “success” meant Victoria remaining the worst-funded state for public education, with funding per student more than \$2,253 below the national average. While Andrews and AEU officials congratulated one another, the Labor government continued to funnel millions of dollars into the private school sector.

The situation has only worsened under Labor’s new premier, Jacinta Allan. Last year the government quietly deferred \$2.4 billion in promised school funding until 2031 in order to satisfy the demands of financial rating agencies such as Moody’s and S&P Global.

The 2022 agreement was not an aberration, but the latest in a long record of AEU-enforced concessions, particularly since a restructuring of the school system initiated by the Labor government in 2003. That year the government commissioned the Boston Consulting Group to develop “Blueprint” reforms aimed at driving up teacher “productivity” through performance benchmarks and managerial oversight.

Every enterprise agreement negotiated by the AEU since then has deepened this assault on educators’ working conditions and the quality of public education.

- The 2004 agreement introduced “performance and development

arrangements” and abandoned fixed class-size ceilings, while allowing “necessary” fixed-term or casual roles—opening the door to expanded insecure short-term contracts.

• The 2008 agreement created an “executive class” for principals and embedded elements of performance-related pay tied to school strategic goals and data. The union hailed it as a success, yet many teachers received raises that barely kept pace with inflation.

• The 2013 agreement, negotiated with the Baillieu Liberal government, added an “unsatisfactory performance” category enabling the department to fast-track dismissals within 13 weeks, removed “priority status” for teachers deemed “in excess,” forcing experienced staff to compete with graduates, and delivered real pay rises of only about 2.75–3 percent.

• The 2017 agreement further tied teacher performance to departmental priorities and student data (including NAPLAN) via reviews and classroom observations, introduced one Professional Practice Day per term and encompassed a wage freeze between October 2015 and April 2017.

The AEU’s 2025 log of claims repeats this pattern. While it supposedly demands a 35 percent pay rise, key protections remain loophole-ridden: class-size measures are framed as “planning guidelines” and principals need only “consult” staff—a non-binding process that allows targets to be exceeded by citing “fixed resources” or “available facilities,” the same gaps that have left Victorian class sizes largely unchanged for two decades.

The log of claims functions as a safety valve aimed at dissipating the anger expressed in a record 716 sub-branch submissions. Mullaly—who receives a salary exceeding \$240,000—has no intention of waging a struggle that would challenge the Allan Labor government’s budget dictates.

Mullaly played a key role in promoting the 2022 sellout agreement and misinformation about its supposed wage and workload improvements. His current calls for strike action are a calculated attempt to contain the unrest among educators, who have reached breaking point.

The AEU bureaucracy understands that if it does not stage a token campaign, it risks losing control of a rank and file determined to fight. Supporting this apparatus are various pseudo-left tendencies—Socialist Alternative, Solidarity and Socialist Alliance—that promote the illusion the AEU can be pressured to fight or democratised through internal reform. They are effectively acting as the last line of defence for union officials against a rebellion from below.

The lesson of the past two decades is clear: the AEU machine does not represent teachers’ interests but those of the state government and the corporate elite.

The AEU functions as a corporatist organisation integrated into the structures of government. Its officials sit on advisory bodies, negotiate behind closed doors with ministers and Treasury officials, and enforce industrial relations laws that ban strike action outside tightly controlled bargaining periods. Their role is to ensure opposition remains within limits acceptable to government and the financial markets. Senior union officials enjoy six-figure salaries and maintain close ties with the Labor Party, whose austerity agenda they police in the schools.

The powerful vote for strike action demonstrates educators’ readiness to fight, but it must become the starting point for an independent struggle.

To translate a yes vote into a genuine fight:

• Educators must break out of the AEU straitjacket by establishing

democratically elected rank-and-file committees in every school. These committees must be independent of the union apparatus and dedicated to a politically independent struggle against the Allan Labor government’s austerity agenda.

• Establish direct links across schools, regions and states—including Queensland and Tasmania, where educators are also taking action. This is essential to unify struggles around common demands and overcome the isolation that allows governments to divide and conquer.

• Advance demands based on the needs of teachers and students, not budget dictates: inflation-indexed wage rises; major reductions 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 with parents, students and other public sector workers to broaden the struggle.

• Demand full transparency: immediate publication of all government offers, full briefings to members and genuine debate before any vote. Reject backroom deals and insist that any agreement be decided through an informed democratic vote, including mass meetings.

The resources for a world-class public education system exist, but they are currently being diverted into military expansion, elite private schools and corporate profits. Labor governments are pouring billions of dollars into AUKUS and other war plans and participating in the criminal US-Israel assault on Iran, while suppressing dissent against the ongoing genocide in Palestine.

Securing the wages and conditions that teachers require demands a socialist perspective that rejects the subordination of education to the budget dictates of the capitalist market and the war machine. Teachers cannot trust the AEU bureaucracy, they must take matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees.

For further discussion please contact the CFPE, the educators’ rank-and-file network:

**Contact the CFPE:**

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