

Australia: Mass strike of Victorian educators reveals anger over pay and conditions

Our correspondents
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Tens of thousands of Victorian public school teachers, education support staff and principals walked off the job on March 24, in the first statewide government school strike in 13 years, converging in central Melbourne in one of Australia's largest stop-work mobilisations since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

About 40,000 gathered outside Trades Hall and then state parliament, with almost every school in the state affected, some having virtually their entire staff out. The March 24 turnout shows the widespread anger among educators over decades of plunging real wages, chronic staff shortages, intensifying workloads and deep funding cuts to public education.

This situation is the product of decades of attacks on public education by both Labor and Liberal governments, aided and enforced by the union bureaucracy, which has accepted and defended the under-funding.

The state Labor government of Premier Jacinta Allan has ripped at least \$2.4 billion from promised school funding and continues to leave Victorian public schools among the lowest funded in the country. The Australian Education Union (AEU), which is tied hand-and-foot to the Labor Party, is desperate to derail the anger of teachers and ram through an agreement in line with the government's demands for a below-inflation 18.5 percent wage rise over four years.

In its bid to keep Victorian teachers divided from their counterparts nationally, the AEU portrays the dispute as being simply about pay differentials with other states. AEU Victorian branch president Justin Mullaly told teachers that the salary comparisons with New South Wales were "damning," saying by October 2026 an experienced teacher there will earn over \$15,000 more than in Victoria, that graduates in Victoria will be 16 percent behind, and so on.

But Mullaly had nothing to say about inflation nor the criminal US-Israeli war on Iran, which, as every teacher at

the rally knew, is sending prices of fuel and other essential commodities soaring. A 4.4 percent annual wage rise will amount to a major real wage cut, on top of those already imposed on teachers with the AEU's assistance.

Teachers should not be duped into thinking that the AEU is actually going to mount a struggle for its claim for a 35 percent wage rise over four years. Since the mid-2000s, while the cost of living has increased by 60–70 percent, the AEU has rammed through deals limited to as little as 2–3 percent "rises" a year. Since 2021 alone, teachers have faced pay cuts of roughly 10 percent.

The 2022 agreement, forced through with censorship of opponents and tight control of information, preserved large class sizes and crushing administrative burdens, while delivering sub-inflation pay rises of less than 2 percent per annum amid the height of surging prices. When asked about the 2022 agreement at a press conference after the rally, Mullaly simply refused to answer, insisting the union was "focused on what we need to do now."

Whether or not teachers in Victoria are among the lowest paid nationally, teachers nationally have had their real wages and conditions eroded over decades. On the same day as the Victorian stoppage, some 1,500 teachers in northwestern Tasmania struck over pay and conditions, rejecting the state government's paltry offer there. Stoppages in other regions took place yesterday and are taking place today under the auspices of the same union—the AEU—yet it was not so much as mentioned at the Victorian rally.

Amid a mounting economic crisis nationally, the Allan government's assault on teachers forms part of a sweeping austerity offensive. At the state level, Labor governments are cutting thousands of public sector jobs, targeting health and education and pressing ahead with the demolition of public housing, while funnelling billions

into infrastructure and projects aligned with corporate and property interests.

Federally, the Albanese Labor government is pouring tens of billions of dollars into AUKUS military preparations and war spending, while maintaining a wage-suppressing, pro-employer industrial relations regime and overseeing an historic transfer of wealth to the banks and big business. The message is clear: workers, including teachers, will have to pay for this agenda.

While the AEU has pushed pay to the forefront, no serious demands have been made to address the chronic working conditions facing teachers and staff in public schools. Class sizes continue to rise, violence and complex behavioural issues are escalating, and educators are working on average around 12 unpaid hours per week to keep schools running.

All the empty invocations at the Melbourne rally of “union power” by AEU officials are a warning that the union is seeking to let off steam as it prepares to go back into closed-door discussions with the government over a sell-out agreement. The AEU is already winding back future action by proposing a series of rolling strikes, which only isolate teachers region by region, and a futile campaign of peppering local Labor MPs with SMS messages.

Claims that Labor will succumb to pressure in an election year in Victoria ignore the fact that this is a party of big business, which has slashed social spending, including to public education, for decades—all with the assistance of the trade unions.

The presence of Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus at the rally in Melbourne is another sharp warning sign for teachers. While she declared that “the whole trade union movement is with you,” there are no ACTU plans for coordinated strikes and a coordinated campaign with teachers in other states, including those in Tasmania, let alone other sections of workers facing similar attacks on pay and conditions.

In reality, McManus’s appearance indicates the fears of not only the state Labor government, but the Albanese government federally, that strikes in Victoria could become the starting point of broader action by teachers and others nationally who are under severe financial pressures. As has been the case in multiple disputes previously, her empty offers of support signal intense efforts behind the scenes to sell out the struggle underway.

The genuine alternative to the government’s austerity

program at the March 24 strike was presented by the Committee for Public Education. Its members and supporters won a warm response at the rally, handing out nearly 2,000 copies of its March 16 statement, which outlines the decades-long record of the AEU in enforcing real wage cuts and worsening conditions.

The crisis in Victorian schools is the product of capitalism, which subordinates every aspect of social life—including the education of the next generation—to the profit requirements of the corporate and financial elite and the imperatives of militarism.

To secure the wages, conditions and resources required, teachers must take matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees in every school, democratically controlled by educators themselves, independent of and opposed to the union apparatus and its collaboration with Labor and big business.

These committees need to unite Victorian teachers with their colleagues in Tasmania and other states, as well as with nurses, public sector workers, students and young people confronting the same offensive. They must develop concrete demands based on what is needed. The CFPE advocates immediate, inflation-busting pay rises for all staff; a massive hiring drive to reduce class sizes and workloads; the abolition of punitive testing and performance regimes; and the redirection of funds from private schools, corporate subsidies and the war budget to rebuild a fully funded, high-quality public school system.

Above all, the movement now emerging among educators must be armed with a consciously socialist perspective, aimed at taking political power out of the hands of the financial oligarchy and reorganising society on the basis of social need, not private profit.

Teachers who agree with this perspective should contact and join the CFPE, participate in the formation of rank-and-file committees in their schools, and help link up their fight with educators and workers across Australia and internationally.

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

X/Twitter: [CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)

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