

Australian teachers speak out against assault on wages, conditions at mass strike in Victoria

Our reporters
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Committee for Public Education (CFPE) members and supporters interviewed teachers, education support staff, parents and students at the March 24 statewide strike of Victorian public school educators, when tens of thousands marched through central Melbourne after walking out of schools across the state.

The scale of the rally and determination of workers expressed a desire to reverse decades of worsening conditions in public education amid a global assault on living and working conditions which in Australia is being spearheaded by Labor federal and state governments.

At the same time, the Australian Education Union (AEU) is already preparing to continue the role it has played for decades, working through back-room negotiations with the Allan Labor government to contain and ultimately sell out educators' demands, while that same government carries out a wholesale assault on the jobs, wages and social conditions of the entire working class.

Secondary school teacher **Nicole** told the CFPE: "We're understaffed and we're stretched. We're run off our feet all the time. We feel like we're being undervalued."

"I think we feel we've been failed by the Labor government. We need to stand up and be strong and show them that we're not going to be complicit and they're not going to have our support."

She noted the broad support that striking teachers were receiving from the population.

"I'm overwhelmed by the support from the parents and the families at our school as well. I think it's just acknowledged that we're doing more with less."

Greg attended with nearly 20 other teachers from Carrum Downs Secondary College in the working-class outer suburbs of southeastern Melbourne.

He noted the union's previous rotten deals, including in 2022 when the AEU enforced a sub-inflation pay rise of

less than 2 percent per annum.

"The atmosphere today was positive but I'm personally sceptical about our chances based on the previous agreement," Greg said. "At our sub-branch we had three votes and said 'no' to the previous agreement... despite all the propaganda that was sent out [by the AEU leadership]. I still don't understand how it got passed."

"After the 2 percent deal, we lost 20 percent of our union sub-branch members," he added.

"There has been long-term damage to public schools beginning with the Kennett [Liberal state government of the 1990s] era. Public schools need to be funded properly. When I went to school at Ringwood Secondary College the difference between the public schools and the private schools wasn't as big as it is today. It's not just our pay rates. Unions across the board are a problem. Our rights have been whittled away."

Karissa is a primary school teacher in Melbourne's western suburbs who has been teaching for 10 years.

"I don't think that the government and the education minister were really willing to listen to what teachers need," she said.

"Do it for the children? Do it for the love of the job? Do it for thanks? Thanks doesn't pay the mortgage. Thanks doesn't pay the bills. All of those things are going up, and our salary is going down in real terms."

"We've got no cap on the student numbers in classes," Karissa added. "We're not being supported with enough funding to be able to provide what we need to do with those students who have IEPs [Individual Education Plans], the students who need the extra support, they really need more ES [education support staff] and better paid ES as well."

Karissa also pointed to the 2022 AEU sellout.

"It was really upsetting. The last offer was reported in the media as a great deal, but it came with loss of conditions—an unacceptable offer. We got less than 2

percent a year and we knew that inflation was going to skyrocket. We were also hoping for a reduction in workload.”

“At the time the union was shutting down opposed comments. I know I had a lot of comments that were deleted from the union Facebook page and social media, because I was really quite upset by the deal that the union was trying to push.”

She highlighted some of the workload issues at her school.

“We want a reduction in meetings so that we actually have time to mark our student books... There’s simply no time to do it.”

Karissa pointed to the mass anger and willingness to fight among education workers and the support this is winning among other sections of the population.

“Take today—it was very obvious. It was clear in people’s faces. We could see, as we marched down, that there were a lot of people watching who were supporting as well,” she said.

The teacher opposed the union’s proposal of limited rolling stoppages.

“The show of strength has enormous significance and instead of going forward on that basis, rolling regional stoppages works to divide everybody up and we actually go backwards. A pause in action does not empower us.”

“It is really a concern that this is all happening under a Labor government,” Karissa added. “It’s infuriating that there are private schools that are getting funding... while ours are waiting and hoping.... We’ve got mould in our ceiling. We’ve got leaking roofs. The place is nearly falling around us in some instances, but we’re not being given the funding to be able to have that fixed. It is inequitable.”

“I think that the most important thing is the social services: the health of the people and the education of the people to improve the future. And that’s why it’s so important that we’re funded appropriately, directing funds into making sure that our children are growing up with the education that they need to be able to face the world of tomorrow.”

Karissa also denounced the funnelling of public funds away from social services into the military to fight US-led wars abroad.

“Not only is money being poured into the military but I think a lot of the targeting for recruitment for the military is from disadvantaged schools where students may not have many other options.

“I don’t think that we should be involved in wars that

other countries and other leaders have instigated.... I don’t think that we should be involving the Australian military in Iran and it’s having a huge impact on our cost of living. I was reading yesterday that, because of the petrol prices, food prices are about to go up as well.”

Clare attended the rally with her two children. She is a lecturer in photography at Melbourne’s RMIT University.

“I’ve got one kid in primary school and one kid about to go into primary school and we just really believe that teachers deserve better pay. They deserve to be recognised, to not have to go through tedious bargaining agreements and to be able to be recognised for the really hard work that they do,” she said.

The lecturer denounced the Labor government’s role in overseeing the degradation of teachers’ conditions over more than a decade.

“It is shocking that this is happening under Labor. Teachers have to buy their own supplies. We’re in a really tragic state of affairs and the Labor government needs to do much more.

“The inequality is crazy and it doesn’t reflect the values of everyday Australians who are out here wanting a quality education for their children. And kids deserve it. Public education deserves the funding,” Clare said.

“I’m a lecturer at university and went on strike last year,” she said. “I came out today in solidarity with teachers and with my kids to support and march.”

“We went on strike last year where we had an enterprise agreement that was heavily negotiated to try and fight for better conditions. Some of those conditions were met, but not all of them and it’s now being reflected in our workloads, where most of my colleagues are working over 100 percent of their workload capacity and it’s just going to lead to more burnout.”

“It’s the same sort of thing as for secondary and primary school teachers,” she added.

“We’re all being asked to do so much more than we’re capable of, and not being paid accordingly. I’m here in solidarity for other teachers in all different levels of education because we all deserve good working conditions and to be paid accordingly.”



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