

Australia: More Victorian teachers and supporters call for better wages, conditions at mass strike

Our reporters
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The *World Socialist Web Site* is publishing more interviews gathered by members and supporters of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) at the March 24 statewide strike of tens of thousands of Victorian public school educators.

While rank-and-file teachers have shown their enthusiasm for a struggle to reverse decades of worsening conditions in public education, the Australian Education Union (AEU) bureaucracy is working behind closed doors with the state Labor government of Jacinta Allan to prepare another sellout agreement as it has done over decades.

CFPE members explained that the struggle to defend public education amid a global assault on living and working conditions requires a fight against the Labor governments that are spearheading the agenda of war and austerity in Australia.

Experienced primary school teacher **Aphrodite** is currently working in the performing arts.

“I was involved in strikes in 2013,” she said. “The conditions in schools are terrible. We did so much heavy lifting along with all the health services during COVID, and this is how we got repaid. It’s just appalling.”

“The governments are cutting and as we now know the government has withdrawn \$2.4 billion that was due to go into the schools.... We’ve got two less classes, so the class sizes have increased. Kids have so many problems these days. It’s really changed since COVID, but the complex problems were coming before COVID and we have no resources to deal with them,” she told the CFPE.

“They [the government] don’t provide you with funding. You have to prove it to get payments and the bar to get needed resources keeps getting raised,” she said. “Whether it is Liberal or Labor in power we need to take care of public education. Education is vital as well as nurses and doctors. They’re your soldiers on the ground.”

“When I first started teaching, we had school nurses, we had support services, and now we don’t have school nurses. If we do, it has to come out of the school budget,” Aphrodite said.

“We need more support services now, because the issues that children and adults are facing are new, serious and complex and so much of the time we have to help the parents. I work in a

school that is dealing with students from overseas with very high needs—refugees coming off the boat. We’ve got a language school across the road and we have to deal with their trauma and all of those complex issues.”

Aphrodite denounced the 2022 AEU-government agreement which imposed a real wage cutting nominal 2 percent “pay increase” and no changes to worsening conditions.

“I don’t know how the last agreement was passed, because it was appalling,” Aphrodite said. “Many thought that vote was very shady. I don’t know what shady deals the union did with [the Labor government of Daniel] Andrews. That is what teachers were discussing and why many resigned from the union.”

“I’m retiring in about nine years’ time. I can’t afford to retire till I’m 67 because I’ve got to get that superannuation up. All our wages are being eroded bit by bit,” she added.

“Too many families are leaving the government system because more money is being cut from government and going to private schools. The teachers are just as good in public schools.”

Sarah, a secondary teacher from Melbourne’s northern working-class suburb Craigieburn, said: “The strike was long overdue, it was so good to see such a big turnout. A lot of talk about the cost-of-living situation has been happening.... It demonstrates we are in a real economic crisis.”

The teacher also denounced the 2022 AEU sellout agreement.

“I didn’t approve the last agreement. This time we are struggling under increasing workload. There are new curriculum demands, forms that must be completed, more meetings. There is a lot of violence in schools and teachers and educators are exhausted. We’re asked to put up with this.

“I remember that 2022 agreement when they were trying to pass the deal and inflation was going to increase. You could see that it was not going to be a good outcome.

“When I went to union meetings, I was always being muted. I was asking for the same things that we are asking for now. I quit the union for two years as I thought they didn’t have my back. I have returned because I want to be involved in the strike action now and in the discussions. We are seeing some

movement now although I still don't fully trust the AEU.

"It is about pay but also work conditions. What the government offered was a slap in the face. I wouldn't accept the conditions even if you offered me a 50 percent pay rise."

Sarah denounced the agenda of austerity and war being pursued by governments internationally, including the illegal US-Israeli war on Iran in which the Australian Labor government is fully complicit.

"Money goes to the military and prisons everywhere except on education. They invest in business and wars and lives are destroyed and affected here as well," she said.

"There are 90 million people in Iran and Trump has threatened everyone. The destruction of the waterways and social infrastructure shows that he was lying when he said he was trying to improve Iranian lives and remove a repressive government. We know he is there just to attack. As soon as the war was announced our prime minister was one of the first people to back the US. We seem to be in the back pocket of the US; it is not something that people want."

Max, a secondary teacher from Broadmeadows also in Melbourne's north, said: "I thought it was a really good turnout. The numbers today show people have had enough. They want a fair deal and that means a significant increase in pay as well as maintaining their conditions.

"I think everyone was upset with what the government offered," he said. "I hope the union leaders... don't come back and say as they did last time, that this was the best they could do.

"I think since 2022 the number of people here is surprising. So many educators were upset with that deal, and it is miraculous that so many came despite that. Many quit the union in frustration but came back to take strike action.

"The 2022 deal was terrible. After the in-principle agreement, the writing was on the wall, and you could see what was going to happen as most teachers did.... During that struggle there were a lot of shady things going on."

Max also denounced war and militarism.

"The US has begun an illegal and evil war against Iran. It is carrying out horrors on the population there. And here we are trying just to make ends meet. The Labor government is not at all dissociating from this crime."

Dylan, a young teacher in Melbourne's inner suburbs, has been teaching for five years.

"I remember in 2022 I was only just starting and I wasn't really aware of the pain and the conditions and the workloads," he said. "But then you realise there is a lot to do. Teachers talk about workload and trying to reduce all the added elements that aren't teaching."

"Being among the lowest funded schools in the country under Labor it is surprising. I suppose they have just been able get away with it," Dylan said. "That's because the union didn't really do their job last time.... I feel like people are critical of the union, but I don't know if they're critical as much as they

probably should be."

"The union speeches at the rally today were repeating the same things over and over again. They absolutely could have been more critical of how the government, previous governments, have gotten it to this point."

"There's a lot to fix in public schools. Class sizes is one of them. Also fully investing in educational support staff, because they get paid a pittance," Dylan added.

"If you have a kid with special needs you have to have that kid on an individual learning plan," Dylan explained. "You can have 10 kids in a class that might be diagnosed with ADHD, ASD. They might have intellectual development issues, hearing impairments, maybe they're also Indigenous—they also have to have an individual learning plan.

"It's very tricky when you have to write one of those and then be faithful to it when you have 25 kids in a class."

Striking educators were joined by parents and students, as well as winning support from passersby who stopped to film, applaud and cheer on the March 24 rally.

CFPE members spoke with **Alex**, a year 10 student who joined the strike with his schoolmates—taking an hour-long train trip with their bikes from the outer southeastern Melbourne suburb Cranbourne.

"We came to the demonstration because we wanted to support all our fantastic teachers and our principal at our school," Alex said. "Me and my friends are here to show our support."

"Teachers needs better conditions and pay. Because the pay is so low we don't have enough teachers at our school. There are about 2,000 kids at our school... but we don't have enough teachers. We are short staffed.

"They find money for all sorts of stuff, war, all this stuff that is not necessary, but we need money for education for a future. Already we are running out of fuel, it is going to affect food, everything—I don't agree with what is happening."



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