

Australian Education Union divides teachers to prepare sellout in Victoria—build rank-and-file committees

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The powerful statewide strike by more than 40,000 Victorian public school teachers, education support staff and principals on March 24 marked a significant turning point. It was the first such action in 13 years. It expressed a long-suppressed anger over plunging real wages, chronic staff shortages and crushing workloads.

However, even as educators rallied at the state Parliament House in Melbourne, the Australian Education Union (AEU) apparatus was already moving to contain, dissipate and ultimately shut down this movement.

A brief chronology of the lead up to the March 24 strike reveals the union's strategy. On March 16, after nearly nine months of closed-doors negotiations, Premier Jacinta Allan's state Labor government put forward a 17–18 percent pay offer over four years—tied to increased workloads—which the AEU formally rejected.

Yet, just four days later, on March 20, the AEU executive and the union's primary and secondary state council voted to water down the campaign, voting for regional half-day strikes and limited, largely ineffectual bans. The rhetoric about “pulling back the throttle,” against the state government, promoted by AEU Victorian branch president Justin Mullaly, quickly proved hollow.

The so-called escalation in Term 2 replaces a unified statewide strike with fragmented regional half-day stoppages, isolating teachers, dissipating momentum and ensuring the government faces no sustained pressure. The proposed bans—fewer after-school meetings, limits on administrative tasks, reduced report comments and refusal to participate in departmental initiatives—will have little or no impact on the Allan government.

This watered-down campaign was determined before the March 24 strike even took place. The purpose of the one-day action was to let off steam after decades of union sellouts, allow the AEU bureaucrats to posture as militant and promote illusions such as a 35 percent pay claim over three years—which they have no intention of fighting for—while preparing to demobilise educators.

The AEU has also used the dispute to try to rebuild membership after thousands resigned from the union in disgust over its 2022 sellout. Under the reactionary enterprise bargaining laws imposed by the Keating federal Labor government and the unions in the 1990s, workers must be union members to participate in legally-protected industrial action, so many educators joined or rejoined the AEU to participate in the March 24 strike and register their opposition to the intolerable conditions in the schools.

At the March 24 rally, amid boasts of a record number of members and bureaucrat-led chants of “union power,” there was no mention of

the 1,500 Tasmanian teachers who walked out the same day over similar conditions.

Just one week later, on April 2, the Tasmanian AEU executive signed off on a deal that offers wage rises of just 3 percent annually for two years and 2.75 percent in the third—another substantial real wage cut, well under the inflation rate, which reached 4.6 percent in March.

The Tasmanian deal provides only token relief for the workload crisis. In a state where 82 percent of schools face critical staff shortages, the government is offering just 30 extra minutes of weekly planning time, rising to 40 minutes next year. Even these measures are subject to “local agreements,” leaving staff exposed to management pressure while unpaid overtime remains entrenched.

The events in Tasmania are a sharp warning to Victorian educators of the sellout being prepared behind closed doors. The decision of the Tasmanian AEU to call off action and isolate educators from their colleagues in Victoria created the conditions for another appalling betrayal.

This follows a well-worn pattern of dividing educators. In 2021, when Victorian teachers voted 97 percent for strike action, educators in New South Wales were already striking and teachers in South Australia were moving to walk out over unsafe COVID-19 conditions. Fearing a developing multi-state struggle, Victorian AEU leaders rushed through a 2022 in-principle agreement that was an historic sellout.

The other defining feature of the AEU bureaucracy is its calculated silence on the worsening social conditions. At the March 24 rally, Mullaly—who receives a salary exceeding \$240,000—said nothing about the escalating war against Iran, soaring inflation or the broader global crisis driving up the cost of living.

As the Reserve Bank of Australia continues to hike interest rates, working-class households face hundreds of dollars more in weekly costs, with inflation forecast to approach 6 percent by mid-year. Instead of addressing this, the AEU reduces the dispute to narrow “pay differentials” with NSW, a deliberate diversion from the fact that union-negotiated increases have averaged just 2–3 percent annually since the mid-2000s, while living costs rose 60–70 percent. Since 2021 alone, teachers have suffered real pay cuts of approximately 10 percent.

The Allan government is under pressure from international credit rating agencies like Moody's and S&P Global to impose “fiscal discipline” amid soaring state debt, projected to reach \$236.6 billion by 2029. Consequently, \$2.4 billion in promised public school funding

has already been deferred, while funding to the elite private schools is reaching unprecedented levels.

The same applies federally, where the Albanese government is funnelling tens of billions of dollars into AUKUS and military spending while deepening its assault on public education. Just last week, the Albanese government announced another funding boost for the military, headlined by an additional \$53 billion over the next decade in the 2026 National Defence Strategy as part of preparations for a US-led war against China. This was followed by the government's announcement of a \$35 billion cut over the next four years to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), attacking the most vulnerable sections of society. That is the largest single cut to an Australian government program this century, and likely the largest ever.

The AEU, tied hand-and-foot to the Labor Party, is imposing Labor's war and austerity agenda in schools.

Providing essential political cover for the AEU leadership are pseudo-left organisations—including Socialist Alternative and Victorian Socialists—operating under the banner of “Socialists in Schools.”

Their role is to keep educators tied to the very union apparatus and Labor governments responsible for years of attacks on public education. Posing as militant critics, they reduce the crisis to weak leadership or insufficient strike action, obscuring the real issue: the unions have become instruments for enforcing wage cuts, rising workloads and austerity. Their calls for “more strikes” remain entirely within the framework of the AEU apparatus, whose function is to suppress any genuine rank-and-file movement.

These groups falsify past struggles to preserve illusions in the unions. They portray defeats such as the 2022 Victorian schools agreement as the result of too little industrial action, rather than a conscious betrayal, involving misinformation and censorship, carried out by the union leadership in collaboration with Labor.

In this way, the pseudo-left acts as a political shield for the discredited union apparatus and a buffer for capitalism amid deepening crisis, war and austerity. They attempt to channel opposition into protest politics, parliamentary pressure and appeals to Labor.

Their central aim is to prevent educators drawing the necessary conclusion, that the defence of public education requires an independent movement of the working class, based on rank-and-file committees and a socialist struggle against capitalism itself.

The way forward: rank-and-file committees

To break out of this political straitjacket, educators must take power out of the hands of the bureaucracy and place it in the hands of the rank and file.

The struggle for decent wages and conditions cannot be won while it remains under the control of the union apparatus. Experience has shown that campaigns led by career officials such as Justin Mullaly—who has overseen successive sellouts since at least 2013—are designed to dissipate anger while keeping any struggle within government budget limits.

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, and enforce industrial laws that restrict strike action to tightly-controlled bargaining periods. Senior union officials enjoy six-figure salaries while policing Labor's agenda.

The powerful walkout on March 24 demonstrated educators' readiness to fight, but it must become the starting point for an independent struggle.

The CFPE urges all teachers and staff to:

- Establish 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, to overcome the deliberate divisions imposed by the unions.
- 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 censorship of oppositional voices and insist that any agreements be decided through informed democratic votes, including mass meetings.
- Link the struggle to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to unite with the international working class in a common fight against capitalism and war.

The resources for a world-class public education system exist, but they are being siphoned into military expansion, elite private schools and corporate profits. To finance the government's war program, billions are being cut from public education, health and the NDIS. This is part of Labor's support for the criminal US-Israeli assault on Iran and continued suppression of opposition to 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.

Educators in Tasmania who reject the recent sellout and those in Victoria who oppose a similar betrayal should immediately contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators' rank-and-file network, for further discussion on building an independent rank-and-file movement of educators:

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

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



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact