

# Australia: Victorian education support staff speak out against AEU-Labor sellout

Our reporters  
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The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) spoke with Education Support (ES) workers about the sellout enterprise agreement the Australian Education Union (AEU) bureaucracy is seeking to impose on educators on behalf of the Victorian Labor government. The union-government deal would amount to a further real pay cut, do nothing to address workload or class sizes and prevent educators from striking until at least 2030.

For ES workers, the proposed agreement is an outright attack. The first-year pay increase hailed as a win by the AEU includes a one-off allowance rather than a permanent wage rise, while ongoing increases remain below those of teachers.

ES staff are already among the lowest-paid workers in schools. Many hold second jobs just to survive while carrying out increasingly complex responsibilities supporting students with disabilities, medical needs and behavioural challenges.

The CFPE is calling for educators to vote “no” to the proposed agreement and take forward the fight through the formation of independent, democratic rank and file committees.

**Rose, an ES worker at a working-class primary school in Melbourne,** said the proposed AEU agreement ignores the worsening crisis confronting ES staff, who are among the lowest-paid and most overworked in public education. “The union make out like we’re all in this together, but they’re not mirroring that with the deal they’re putting forward,” she said. “It’s all a load of BS really.”

Rose has worked in public schools in a range of administration and other roles. She explained that while teachers face enormous workloads, any work taken away from teachers increasingly falls onto ES staff. “What a lot of people fail to see is that when tasks are removed from teachers, those tasks still need to be done. They go to ES staff. ES workload never reduces—it just keeps growing.”

Rose described a system under severe strain from staffing shortages, expanding enrolments and rising student need. “We’ve got growing enrolments every year, oversized classrooms and constant staff shortages. Most days we have split classes because there aren’t enough teachers or CRTs [casual relief teachers] to cover absences.”

She said ES staff were expected to perform countless duties beyond their official roles. “You’re helping with enrolments, transitions, finance, excursions, wellbeing, classroom support—whatever’s needed. We quite often work additional hours because the school literally can’t function without those roles.”

“We’re there for the kids. You can’t just turn a blind eye if a

family is struggling or if something doesn’t seem right with a child. You follow things up because you care, even when it’s not technically part of your role.”

She explained that many ES workers survive on such low wages they are forced to work second jobs. “I know ES staff who work nights in supermarkets and delis just to get by,” she said. “A lot of classroom ES were on such low pay before the last agreement that even when they moved up a level, people thought it was a huge increase, but really they just weren’t being paid properly in the first place.”

Under the latest agreement, she said ES workers would receive only a fraction of the wage increases being promoted for teachers. “I looked at the figures and teachers in their first years will be something like \$13,000 better off fairly quickly, while ES staff at best will be around \$3,800 better off. It’s insulting.”

She criticised the government’s reliance on one-off lump sum payments instead of permanent increases to base pay. “They make out like they’re doing you a favour with allowances, but governments don’t do favours. It benefits them because they’re not committing to ongoing increases. We want a fair deal for teachers but also an equal percentage for ES.”

Rose said rising living costs were placing enormous financial pressure on working-class and middle-income households. “Every month I’m getting another email from the bank saying the mortgage is going up again. But honestly, the mortgage isn’t even the worst part anymore—it’s groceries, fuel, insurance, everything. We’re not asking to be paid more than we’re worth. We just want to be paid properly for the work we already do.”

She said conditions inside public schools had deteriorated sharply since the onset of the COVID pandemic, while governments continued cutting resources and disability funding.

“Victoria brands itself as the ‘Education State,’ but they keep cutting funding while expecting schools to absorb more and more complex needs.”

Rose described schools increasingly dealing with severe behavioural and disability-related issues without adequate support, staffing or training. “Students with very high needs are coming into mainstream settings, but we don’t have the support structures or funding to properly support them.”

She said the federal Labor government’s cuts to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) would intensify the pressure on schools, families and ES workers. “There are so many children with diagnoses and really high needs, and families just can’t get

the support they need. Everything flows back onto schools and ES staff.”

Rose described ES workers carrying out highly specialised and emotionally demanding work every day. “You’ve got ES staff monitoring feeding tubes, administering medication, supporting non-verbal students, managing behaviour crises, feeding hungry kids and supporting traumatised families—all while running around the school doing five other jobs. You’ve got young teachers being thrown into really difficult classrooms because of the shortage, and they rely heavily on ES support just to get through the day.”

Rose said governments were exploiting the commitment and care of school workers while refusing to provide decent wages or conditions. “They take advantage of the fact that we care. We stay because of the kids, but that shouldn’t mean we miss out on fair pay and conditions.”

She also condemned the anti-democratic conduct of the AEU leadership throughout the enterprise bargaining process. “I got blocked by the union on Facebook just for questioning why strike action had been suspended when there was no deal on the table. If members can’t ask questions or raise concerns without being censored, what sort of democracy is that? The union clearly works for the government not for us.”

She expressed deep distrust of the ratification process. “Everybody I spoke to after the 2022 agreement said they voted no, yet somehow the agreement still passed. I find that very hard to believe.”

Rose warned that the agreement would deepen the staffing crisis already confronting public education. “This deal is going to push more staff out of schools. Teacher shortages will get worse, ES shortages will get worse, and students will keep slipping through the cracks.”

**Pam, an ES worker with 15 years’ experience in public schools,** said the proposed AEU agreement is a “kick in the teeth” for ES staff already struggling under impossible workloads, low pay and rising living costs.

Pam works full time in a primary school. Her main role is coordinating Disability Inclusion funding applications for high-needs students although she also has a range of other responsibilities.

“I’m barely surviving,” she said. “I’ve got a high-pressure job and I’ve been struggling for the last 15 years working for the Education Department. We need to start getting paid properly for what we do.”

Pam explained that securing disability funding for students is an exhausting and highly bureaucratic process requiring constant coordination between teachers, specialists, families and the Education Department.

“I’m usually working on about 15 students at one time,” she said. “Each student can end up with around 30 documents. There are behaviour support plans, learning plans, specialist reports, testing, teacher evidence, funding applications—it’s endless. We have to fight tooth and nail just to get any funding. Even at the meetings, they still don’t want to give us the money.”

“If we word one thing wrong in a document, it can put us down a whole funding level,” she explained. “We’ve had to learn exactly what they want because otherwise students miss out.”

Her school supports large numbers of autistic students, ADHD students and children with intellectual disabilities and complex behavioural needs. Some classrooms have two or three ES workers assigned just to cope. “We’ve got more ES than teachers,” she said. “Every classroom has at least one ES because the needs are so high.”

“By the time we get funding approved, it often doesn’t even pay for one ES wage, and some classrooms have two or three ES staff.”

She warned that cuts to the NDIS would have devastating consequences for schools, students and workers alike. “If kids lose NDIS support, they don’t get specialists, families can’t afford therapies and schools lose funding support too. It’s going to have a snowball effect.”

“Labor’s supposed to stand for workers, but they’re cutting NDIS and public education,” Pam said. “They’ve got the money—they’re just choosing not to spend it on ordinary people or kids who need support.”

Although she works full time, Pam said she has a second job on Saturdays to survive financially.

“I’ve been a single mum most of the time I’ve worked in schools,” she explained. “I pay nearly \$600 a week rent and I still can’t get ahead. Every time I try to save money something happens and I have to move again or pay another bill. You’re basically living to work—you’re barely paying for the roof over your head.”

Pam currently earns only around \$78,000 a year despite performing multiple highly specialised roles. Alongside disability funding coordination, she also manages medication administration, oversees first aid systems, and performs additional administrative duties across the school.

“How can anyone do all this in the hours we work?” Pam said ES staff routinely faced physical violence and emotional exhaustion at work. “We get punched, scratched, kicked, bitten, spat on—you name it,” she said. “People are burning out.”

Pam criticised the proposed four-year agreement, warning that workers would be locked into deteriorating conditions with no right to strike. “I don’t understand why anyone would vote yes,” she said. “If we don’t fight now, where are we going to be in four or five years?”

She also expressed growing distrust toward the AEU leadership. “I’m only starting to realise now that they’re not really on our side,” she said. “They take our money but they’re not fighting for what workers are actually asking for.”

Pam said many ES staff felt invisible despite schools depending entirely on their labour. “If all the ES walked off the job tomorrow, schools wouldn’t run,” she said. “We all work together. We all support the kids. But we’re not being shown our value.”



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