

Australia: Educators form rank-and-file committee in Victoria amid rejection of sellout deal, mass strike tomorrow

Committee for Public Education
21 July 2026

Public school educators across Victoria will hold their second full-day strike of the year tomorrow, after rejecting the latest sellout enterprise agreement pushed by the Victorian Labor government and the Australian Education Union (AEU) bureaucracy.

Despite the attempts of the AEU leadership to stampede teachers into endorsing a deal that would lock in stagnant pay and do nothing to address soaring workloads, educators voted by 51.18 percent, in a ballot that concluded yesterday, to reject the agreement and proceed with strike action. This is the second mass repudiation of the sellout in several months.

Teachers have made clear their determination to fight, but are continually coming up against an AEU bureaucracy that works as an arm of the big business Labor government, against the interests of educators.

It was in this context that a meeting of Victorian teachers and staff was convened by the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) on Saturday. The gathering resolved to form a statewide Educators Rank-and-File Committee, completely independent of and opposed to the AEU bureaucracy.

The committee aims to bring together educators, union and non-union alike, to take control of the dispute, out of the hands of the AEU leaders, to break the division and isolation that the bureaucracy has imposed and to fight for demands that meet the needs of educators and public schools, not what governments and their lackeys in the union bureaucracy deem to be affordable.

Building the committee and preparing independent action by teachers is the crucial next step, pointed to by the entire situation and the course of the current dispute itself.

In June, the AEU bureaucracy struck an in-principle agreement with the state Labor government that left the intolerable workload crisis untouched while proposing pay increases far short of restoring the substantial loss of real wages caused by decades of sellout deals and years of soaring living costs.

Following a completely undemocratic campaign by the AEU, the agreement was voted down in a June ballot, with almost 58 percent of educators voting no.

The rejection of the deal, the first time in four decades, shocked the union apparatus, the Labor government and the political establishment, expressing the massive anger and frustration of educators.

Fearing a growing rebellion, the union bureaucracy moved swiftly to contain opposition. It launched a survey claiming it was “listening” to members’ concerns while announcing a 24-hour strike for July 23, in an attempt to present a militant façade.

Before the survey was complete, the AEU bureaucracy moved immediately into closed-door negotiations with the Allan government. On Friday morning, an email was sent to all school staff employees by Tony Bates, Secretary of the Department of Education, promoting a revised deal that was scarcely any different to the one that teachers had rejected.

The AEU bureaucracy convened an emergency meeting of its joint primary and secondary council which resolved to immediately commence an online vote of all members to accept or reject the revised deal, concluding on Tuesday at 1:00 pm. The clear aim, to bulldoze teachers into accepting the agreement, was defeated.

An alternative perspective was outlined at the CFPE convened meeting on Saturday, which was held as that ballot was underway.

Will Marshall, a secondary teacher in a Victorian public high school and long-time member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and Committee for Public Education (CFPE), opened with a report situating the dispute within a broader global and national crisis, pointing to the implementation of austerity in education, health and other essential services alongside escalating militarism.

He explained, “It’s in this context of an economic system lurching towards real catastrophe, while simultaneously pouring resources into the military, that the struggle we are engaged in is taking place. This is why the Allan Labor government insists there’s no money for class size reduction, no money for workload reduction.”

Sue Phillips, national convenor of the CFPE, a primary school teacher and a long-standing SEP member, reviewed the repackaged agreement and the anti-democratic methods being used to impose it.

Phillips described the union’s conduct as “a real warning,” stating it showed “the agreement can’t withstand genuine examination.” She explained that the ballot timeline itself was designed to suppress opposition.

Phillips said, “It’s a repackaged agreement with cosmetic changes designed to fit within the Allan government’s budget. There are minor adjustments, particularly for education support

staff, but the central issues—workload, class sizes, face-to-face teaching time and staffing—remain untouched.”

She stressed that chronic understaffing and unsustainable workloads were the driving forces behind the rejection of the original agreement: “Teachers are routinely working 50 to 60 hours a week. Critical tasks—planning, assessment, reporting—are pushed into evenings, weekends and holidays. Yet the revised agreement does virtually nothing to change this.”

The situation was set to worsen, as tens of thousands of children were forced off the National Disability Insurance Scheme in a brutal austerity measure by the federal Labor government, with already crisis-ridden public schools and hospitals expected to deal with the fallout.

Phillips emphasised that the AEU could not be pressured to fight for educators. “Its response to the mass ‘no’ vote in June is to force through a repackaged agreement under anti-democratic conditions. This is why a different perspective is needed—the way forward lies in building independent rank-and-file committees democratically controlled by educators themselves.”

A wide-ranging and lively discussion followed, with educators raising concerns about both the content of the agreement and the process surrounding it.

One participant noted the difficulty of assessing the revised deal under the rushed conditions: “There’s a lot of information to go through... but having the time to understand what the differences or changes were was really challenging considering we only received the deal on Friday.”

Others emphasised that the core issues remained unresolved. One educator said workloads were “driving public education into a deep crisis,” adding that teachers were leaving the profession because of the unsustainable demands.

Another participant said: “There is still no meaningful reduction in class sizes. Anyone who has spent time in a classroom knows that is one of the biggest drivers of workload. Smaller classes reduce planning, assessment, reporting, behaviour management and allow teachers to give students the attention they deserve.

“This agreement reflects the same pattern we have seen for years. Small concessions are promoted by the union as major wins while the fundamental issues remain unresolved. We need to organise independently, reject this agreement and fight for meaningful pay rises, smaller class sizes, genuine workload reform and properly funded public education.”

The meeting discussed a set of demands reflecting the needs of educators, education support staff and students. These included:

- An immediate 40 percent wage increase to recover years of real wage losses, with salaries indexed to inflation through automatic cost-of-living adjustments.
- Maximum class sizes of 15–20 students to improve both learning conditions and educator workload.
- A minimum of eight hours each week (and for ES two hours) of guaranteed self-directed in-school planning, assessment and collaboration time, together with substantial reductions in face-to-face teaching.
- The hiring of thousands of additional teachers and Education Support staff, including at least one full-time ES staff member allocated to every class. Additional ES in the classroom for

students with additional needs in the ratio of ES staff to students at 1:2, to end chronic understaffing and excessive workloads.

- Fully funded support for students with disabilities and additional needs, including psychologists and specialist support staff in every school.

- Educators, not governments and corporate consultants, must determine what and how students learn based on professional expertise and the needs of their students.

- No four-year no-strike clause; the right to take industrial action should not be signed away.

- Billions of dollars redirected away from military expansion into public education, ending public subsidies for elite private schools and guaranteeing every child access to a high-quality public education.

The meeting moved and unanimously adopted a resolution to establish the Victorian Educators Rank-and-File Committee, emphasising that these demands could only be fought for through a complete rebellion against the AEU leadership and a fight to unify all educators, across Victoria and nationally. Teachers and staff have to link up with other sections of the working class, such as doctors and allied health employees in Victoria currently in dispute, and nurses in South Australia in a common political struggle against austerity and those implementing it, above all the state and federal Labor governments.

An educator explained her support for the CFPE resolution:

“I voted in favour because the AEU has a long record of failing to represent school staff. Over more than two decades, I have seen working conditions steadily decline while agreements are presented as wins. Teachers and education support staff are doing more with less, and the union continues to work within the government’s limits.

“The CFPE’s proposal offers a way to organise independently and fight for real change. Rank-and-file committees are the way forward. There is no point continuing to pressure a union that has demonstrated it will not lead a genuine struggle.”

For further information contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

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

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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