

Australia: Second strike by Victorian teachers deepens crisis for Labor government and unions

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Tens of thousands of Victorian public school teachers, education support staff and principals walked off the job yesterday in their second statewide strike this year. They converged on Melbourne's Bourke Street Mall before marching to the state parliament, in one of the most significant displays of opposition to the state Labor government's austerity agenda in decades.

Hundreds of educators travelled to Melbourne from country areas, while rallies and marches were also held in regional centres including Wodonga, Mildura and Sale. The action forced the closure of hundreds of schools across the state while others operated with limited staff.

As in the previous strike on March 24, more than 30,000 educators, parents and students took to the streets, opposing the sell-out agreement between the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the state government. Hundreds held their own handmade placards expressing their anger and frustration towards a deal that fails to halt the decline in real wages or seriously address the intolerable workloads and conditions driving burnout and a growing exodus from the profession.

Yesterday's strike was the outcome of a continuing rebellion by educators, not only against the government but increasingly directed at the AEU bureaucracy. Victorian educators have now voted down two successive sellout agreements this year. An in-principle deal between the government and union in May was rejected by 57.7 percent in June, and the hastily repackaged "revised" offer, by 51.2 percent in a ballot that concluded on Tuesday. This is the first time in more than four decades that educators have twice repudiated AEU-endorsed deals.

Yesterday's strike, with its broad participation across Victoria and the determination to continue the fight and strong support from parents, has deepened the crisis confronting the Labor government of Premier Jacinta

Allan, the union bureaucracy and the political establishment.

Evidently concerned that it is losing control of the dispute, the AEU leadership sought to minimise any political discussion and conclude the rally in Melbourne as quickly as possible. After marching striking educators to the state parliament, five speakers spoke for a few minutes each and the demonstration was over in little more than half an hour.

In his speech, AEU Victorian Branch President Justin Mullaly offered little beyond slogans: "We are standing united. We are union-proud, and we are union-powerful... We will escalate our campaign, if we need to. We will stop work again."

As it has done from the outset, the union will do everything possible to prevent any further industrial action by obstructing and wearing down opposition to its sell-out deal with the government. Mullaly advanced no concrete demands and said little about the substance of the dispute. He instead repeated empty appeals to the Allan government to live up to its branding of Victoria as the "Education State" and properly fund public education.

AEU Vice President Briley Stokes appeared on the Channel 7 Sunrise program Thursday morning reiterating the same threadbare line, saying Victorian students are regarded by the government as "worth less" because funding for public education is the lowest nationally.

In reality, as in Victoria, public education in every other state has been systematically run into the ground by successive governments, Labor and Coalition alike. This call to lift spending to match other states, which only divides teachers nationally, will do little to end the crisis facing staff in Victorian schools.

Yesterday's strike only deepens the political crisis of the Labor government in Victoria, which is facing an

election later this year. Heavily in debt, it has delayed at least \$2.4 billion from promised school funding, while overseeing public sector cuts and the systematic destruction of high-rise public housing impacting on the most vulnerable sections of the working class. As a result, Labor is reliant on the union to suppress the determined opposition of teachers and ram through a sell-out agreement.

The strike was prominently covered in the media nationally, reflecting a distinct nervousness in ruling circles that it could prompt other teachers, and broader sections of workers, to take action against declining real wages and the erosion of conditions by governments and corporations. While no mention of the strike was voiced publicly at the Labor Party's national conference taking place in Adelaide, it was undoubtedly discussed in the backrooms and corridors by the Labor ministers and apparatchiks, union bureaucrats and business leaders present.

There is widespread public anger and opposition to the federal Labor government's May budget, which included \$63.8 billion in cuts to social spending over four years, most notably the gutting of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). The impact will be borne by ES staff and teachers, as tens of thousands of children are forced off the NDIS and public schools without additional funding, staffing or specialist resources. The same budget directs tens of billions of dollars to boost the military as the Australian government supports US-led wars in Ukraine and the Middle East and preparations for war with China.

The concern in the political establishment over the failure of the AEU to rein in the opposition of educators in Victoria is reflected in a turn by the media to give coverage to pseudo-left organisations such as Socialist Alternative's "Socialists in Schools" and Solidarity's "Fight the Crisis." For all their militant and socialist-sounding posturing, these groups insist that teachers remain straitjacketed within the union apparatus with the perspective of pressuring the government for a few more crumbs, and thus function as a useful political safety valve.

What is anathema to those in power is the call by the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) for a rebellion by teachers and school staff against the union and the formation of independent democratic rank-and file committees in schools to wage a genuine industrial and political struggle against the Labor government for decent wages and proper working conditions in schools.

The CFPE distributed material on the formation of a Victorian Educators Rank-and-File Committee. The statewide rank-and-file committee was established at a CFPE-convened meeting of Victorian teachers and staff on Saturday, July 19, as the AEU's second rushed ballot was underway. It aims to bring together educators, union and non-union alike, to take control of the dispute out of the hands of the AEU leadership, and turn out to other sections of the working class—doctors, allied health professionals, council workers and others involved in similar struggles over wages and conditions.

The CFPE meeting discussed a series of demands, including an immediate 40 percent inflation-busting pay rise for all staff; a massive hiring of staff to reduce class sizes and workloads; and the redirection of funds from corporate subsidies, elite private schools and the war budget to rebuild a fully funded, public school system of the highest standard.

The resources exist to provide high-quality public schools and decent pay and conditions for all educators. But they are monopolised by the billionaires, banks and corporations, and diverted into the war machine. These resources must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control, and redirected to meet social need, not private profit.

The CFPE urges all educators who support this socialist perspective to get involved and contact us.

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

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

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To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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