

Australia: Victorian educators speak out at strike rally in Melbourne

Our reporters
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About 35,000 public school teachers and support staff joined a march and rally in Melbourne on Thursday as educators across the Australian state of Victoria held a one-day strike. It was the second state-wide stoppage this year against the sell-out deal orchestrated behind closed doors by the state Labor government of Jacinta Allan and the Australian Education Union (AEU) in the Australian state of Victoria.

The AEU was compelled to call the strike after a majority of teachers rejected a repackaged, minimally change version of the agreement that they had voted down in March. For the union apparatus, it was a matter of getting the strike over as quickly as possible.

The teachers assembled in Bourke Street, marched to the state parliament building for the rally. The union bureaucrats hurried through their empty remarks as quickly as possible, advanced no demands on the government and shut down the rally after little more than half an hour. It should be taken as a warning that the union has no intention of waging a genuine fight for decent wages and conditions.

Teachers and school staff are rightly angry at the low wages and deteriorating conditions in public schools that not only affect themselves, but students and parents. Hundreds brought along homemade placards to vent their anger and frustration over the state of public education after decades of underfunding by Labor and Coalition governments alike. Some had travelled hundreds of kilometres to attend the Melbourne rally.

Many placards pointed out that it was not just poor wages but the intolerable workload and conditions that they opposed—"Australian media says it is about pay, my workload says otherwise" and "Would you work 12.5 hours extra per week for free? Sounds like wage theft to me."

Others ridiculed the government's promotion of Victoria as the Education State—"Education State or Exploitation State!" and "Hey, Education State! I'm one teacher. I can't do the work of eight."

Some highlighted what faces new teachers and teacher's aides—"New teacher here. I burnout every term. I don't want to quit. Labor, please listen," and "Teachers' aides should not need 3 jobs to survive! One job, fair pay, that's it."

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE)—the rank-and-file network of educators in Australia—campaigns at the rally

for the building of rank-and file committees independent of the union in every school and fighting demands to address the crisis of public education. We publish below a selection of interviews from the rally.

Michele, an experienced teacher at a school for students newly arrived from other countries, said she struck to support ES staff.

"Our ES staff are not properly supported. They don't get a paid lunch break. Even if they're given a 50 percent increase on their pay, 50 percent of very little is not a lot. But obviously, they're not being offered 50 percent.

"At our school all the ES staff are multicultural education aides, they all speak other languages, they all come from other countries. They struggle with recognition. They struggle with getting a job that's equivalent to their experience and qualifications from their own country. Some are doctors, journalists, principals.

"One of the things that burns is there seems to be unlimited money for private schools and yet we continue to be cut. Most classrooms today will have at least one student with additional needs but you don't get an extra support person to manage that. When teachers are away, often the classes are just split. Suddenly you've got an extra 12 kids, basically it's just child minding."

Ted, an Education Support worker, spoke about the problems confronting students with special needs and the existing lack of resources for such children.

"There are a lot of students with special needs, even at relatively wealthy schools. It takes such a long time to get external help from various organisations that deal with health, mental health etc. There are real problems in schools with Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia, and ADHD as well as other learning difficulties. There is also trauma and all of these can cause major disruption in classes. Schools overall don't have the ability to support their students. Where is the labour in Labor?"

Catherine a young teacher from an outer northern suburban primary school, spoke about the lack of funding particularly for vulnerable children.

"I am a Year 2 teacher, and I teach students at a pre-foundation level who can't yet count by 100. One student for instance is lucky if he gets three hours assistance a day. In

many cases such children become behavioural issues when they don't have extra care. My area is low socioeconomic and there is a lot of trauma amongst the children.

"We have about 700 children at the school, and we just don't have enough Education Support staff. In the first AEU deal there was not enough money for educators and ES staff weren't included. That was unfair. In the second deal our money didn't change it was a similar deal to the first. The impact of NDIS is going to be massive. It is already such a struggle to get money for students who need it. In our school there is at least one child in every class who needs such support. Labour is not doing what they preach. They, Labor and the AEU are trying to rush us through this deal."

[The federal Labor government is slashing funding for the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and removing all support for hundreds of thousands of children with disabilities. Inevitably this will impose enormous new burdens on already overstretched public schools.]

Amie, an experienced ES staff member, attended the rally with a group of staff from Colac West Primary school which is 150 kilometres west of Melbourne.

"At one point I was the only ES in the whole school and I worked through my lunch breaks making sandwiches and lunches for students that don't have lunches. I was never getting a break. The agreement still does not provide a paid lunch break.

"Then I was getting clothes for kids that are cold, I would organise all that. It was up to me to organise the storeroom for First Aid, and sort out the kids' clothes. We actually have a washing machine, so it was up to me to also do all the washing for the school, so I would wash the clothes and the tea towels, for kitchen garden. That was all my job. So, a lot of that had to be done before, after school and during my breaks.

Asked what she thought about the lack of resources in the schools, the fact that the Allan Labor government had delayed \$2.4 billion in funding for public schools, Amie said, "That was terrible and very sad. We are a low economically disadvantaged school with many of the parents without work, unemployed, it's very bad.

"The lack of resources is making staff leave and the wages are not enough. That is the situation for a lot of us. To survive I have a second job. I pretty much finished work at the primary school and go to my next job, which pays me a bit extra money.

"I also have four kids of my own that have special needs that I care for. I am very passionate about helping kids. So, when the government announced in the first deal that all ES were getting was a one-off allowance I was disgusted. We are worth far more than that—we do so much behind the scenes that no-one sees."

Amie said, "Teachers and ES are dealing with very complex issues in the classrooms. One of my sons was someone with complex needs and the school struggled a lot with him. There were many times picking him up from school, leaving work to

pick him up because they would have different ES in there all the time, and only in there for part of the day. He's a kid that struggles with social skills, self-regulation, and there's no support.

"There's absolutely none, and it's actually sad to see, and teachers these days are trying to deal with that on their own, as well as other kids from trauma backgrounds, and because we're low socioeconomic, having no money, the government does not seem to care."

Ray, a digital marketing professional, joined the rally to support teachers.

"I think teaching is a very noble profession because you are preparing the next generation. But unfortunately, I think the dynamics of teaching has totally flipped on its head. My husband's dad is a retired teacher and he will share a lot of memories with us about how it was.

"Friends of mine who are teachers, they struggle a lot in the sense that I don't think they are respected. They are stretched in a lot of ways. The system is beating them. It's now not designed to look after them to make sure that they get quality care for the benefit of education."

Ray connected the lack of funding for education, healthcare and welfare to the billions spent on militarism.

"I think there are certain priorities where money goes there first," he said. "I feel upset. What have we become? The wrong people are in control of political mechanisms to fulfill their own agendas.

"The one percent of the global population, billionaires, who basically see fit to own the world, and then we are there to keep them in power, to keep them wealthy.

"People forget that we have the power. Not as an individual, but united with the correct message. I think we can evoke change and undo the system that is no longer working."

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