

Australia: Private school teachers in Melbourne vote to strike for first time

Our reporters

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Teachers at Overnewton Anglican Community College, an independent P-12 school in Melbourne's western suburbs, have voted to take industrial action for the first time in the school's history.

This is a further indication, following strikes in government schools across Australia, that the developing revolt of educators against wage cuts and intolerable workloads is spreading beyond the public sector into the private and independent schools.

Staff at the college, which enrolls 2,146 students and charges annual fees of up to \$23,750, voted to begin work bans from September 8, and to walk off the job for four hours from midday on September 17. The bans include refusing to adhere to the school's dress code policy, boycotting co-curricular activities and parent-teacher interviews.

The campaign follows six months of failed negotiations, during which staff rejected an offer of a 14 percent pay rise over three years. Teachers are demanding a 37 percent pay increase, plus a \$5,000 annual "healthcare allowance" for staff caring for students with medical needs.

One teacher told the Melbourne *Herald Sun*: "Industrial action is the result of the goodwill that has historically kept Overnewton functioning being eroded to the point that staff feel they have no choice but to strike. This has never happened before in the history of the college."

The Overnewton strike vote cannot be understood in isolation. It follows teacher strikes over the past year in Queensland, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory and an historic rebellion by Victorian public school teachers and education support staff.

The Victorian government school educators this year struck twice statewide and voted down two successive sellout agreements negotiated by the Australian

Education Union (AEU) with the state Labor government. This was the first time in more than four decades that educators repudiated AEU-endorsed deals.

The AEU and Premier Ben Carroll's state government are currently trying to push a third version of this deal through an all-staff vote in the education department. This proposed Victorian Government Schools Agreement amounts to a further real wage cut, locking in sub-inflationary increases, as well as continuing intolerable staffing shortages and workloads, with a four-year "no further claims" clause that functions as a no-strike provision until 2030.

The AEU-state government's nominal pay rises of 28 to 32 percent over four years constitute another real wage cut—on top of one inflicted by the AEU and the state Labor government in 2022—under conditions of soaring mortgage payments, rents and prices, fuelled by the criminal US war on Iran, which is backed by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's federal Labor government.

Despite its inadequacy, the headline 28 to 32 percent figure has set off a chain reaction across the school sector. In the past Catholic schools have been forced to grant pay parity, and independent schools are now under pressure to restore the wage margins by which they compete for staff.

As with the sellout being pushed by the AEU for government school educators, the 37 percent pay claim advanced by the Independent Education Union (IEU) at Overnewton must be measured against years of wage cutting and increasing inflation and cost-of-living rises.

In addition, private school teachers are expected to perform substantial unpaid work—regular weekend and out-of-hours co-curricular duties—on top of their classroom loads.

The IEU is already positioning itself to contain, divert

and shut down the Overnewton struggle, just as the AEU is seeking to do to public school educators.

IEU Victorian general secretary David Brear's public comments are telling. He frames the dispute in terms of independent schools' need to "attract and retain great staff"—that is, in terms of the labour-market competition between employers, not as a unified fight by educators against exploitation and deteriorating conditions.

Brear's claim that being "paid above government rates" has been how the "additional work" of independent school staff "was recognised" is an admission that the IEU accepts the framework of unpaid overtime.

The IEU, like the AEU, functions as an industrial police force for the employers. Its aim will be to isolate and wear down the Overnewton teachers, negotiate a face-saving "improvement" on the rejected 14 percent offer and then stampede members into accepting it through a rushed ballot with minimal discussion.

Overnewton teachers should draw the lesson of the public school struggle. The AEU responded to two mass "no" votes and two statewide strikes by repackaging the same agreement with cosmetic changes and attempting to ram it through by anti-democratic means, including scare campaigns about a worse settlement under a future Liberal or One Nation government. The IEU will try to follow suit.

The decisive task facing Overnewton teachers, and educators across the independent and Catholic sectors, is to take control of the struggle out of the hands of the trade union bureaucracy.

The first step is to reject any deal that falls short of the genuine needs of staff. That means a real, inflation-indexed wage increase that restores lost purchasing power, and an end to unpaid co-curricular and out-of-hours work, with all additional duties properly remunerated or eliminated. It means enforceable limits on workloads, and the full funding of support for students with additional needs, including the employment of specialist staff, rather than the offloading of these duties onto classroom teachers.

The second step is to build independent, democratic rank-and-file committees in every school, controlled by staff themselves, trade union and non-union alike. The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) has already convened the formation of a Victorian Educators Rank-and-File Committee, bringing together teachers and ES

staff to take control of their disputes out of the unions' hands and to reach out nationally and internationally for wider working-class support. We urge independent school staff to join us.

The resources exist to provide high-quality education and decent pay and conditions for all educators. They are monopolised by the billionaires, banks and corporations and diverted into AUKUS and other war preparations, while the Albanese government impose \$63.8 billion in social spending cuts this year and guts the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), which will intensify the burden on educators in the schools.

The struggle at Overnewton is part of a movement of the working class as a whole, including university staff, public service workers and transport and industrial workers, against this austerity and war agenda.

The Overnewton educators should not be misled into a narrow, school-by-school fight over fee structures and pay differentials. They should reject the inevitable attempt of the VIEU bureaucracy to pit them against government school teachers by framing their struggle as a campaign for extra loose change compared with their public sector peers.

The Overnewton strike can and must become the starting point for a unified struggle of all educators—public, Catholic and independent—at every level of the education system, against the union apparatuses and the governments and employers they serve, and for a fully funded, high-quality public education system for every student.

To discuss these issues, contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators' rank-and-file network:

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

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

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