

Australia: The Victorian educators' struggle—lessons of a sellout

Committee for Public Education
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The sellout of this year's Victorian public school educators' fight contains critical political lessons for teachers, school staff and workers.

In this month's final all-staff ballot, 93 percent of education staff who participated voted to accept the fundamentally unchanged third version of a deal struck between the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the state Labor government, entrenching four more years of untenable workloads, low wages and a worsening staffing crisis.

For the first time in more than four decades, Victorian teachers had twice rejected AEU-Labor agreements and twice taken statewide strike action, winning widespread public support. This was part of wider opposition among educators which has seen, over the past year, the first strikes in many years, including two 24-hour stoppages in Queensland, half- and full-day strikes in Tasmania, and stoppages in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT).

But the rebellion in Victoria was ultimately suppressed.

The four-year agreement, which bans further strikes until 2030, means teachers and education support staff will continue working 50 to 60 hours a week, with no enforceable workload limits, class-size caps or reduction in face-to-face teaching. One less meeting per week makes no real difference.

The 28–32 percent nominal pay increases over more than four years, including a \$2,000 one-off payment, do not even cover the 10 percent wage losses accumulated since 2021, let alone the soaring cost of living driven by the US war against Iran.

Moreover, the Albanese federal Labor government's cuts to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) will deprive thousands of students with disabilities of vital additional supports, further intensifying the crisis in public schools, already at breaking point.

How has this happened?

From the outset, the Committee for Public Education

(CFPE), the educators rank-and-file network, warned that the AEU's log of claims, demanding a 35 percent wage rise over three years, smaller classes and reduced workloads, was a fraud. It was an attempt to provide a militant façade after the union's last imposition of a sellout on behalf of the Labor government in 2022—the latest in a long line of such betrayals.

On March 17, the CFPE stated in “Victorian educators at a crossroads—the March 24 strike and the case for rank-and-file committees” that the AEU's pledge to go “full throttle” for a 35 percent increase could not be trusted, given its record of sellouts. We called for the formation of democratic independent rank-and-file committees to unite educators across schools, regions and states in a political struggle against the government's austerity program.

After a ballot produced a 98 percent vote for strikes, more than 40,000 educators walked out on March 24 in the first statewide strike for 13 years. But the AEU executive, four days earlier at a state primary and secondary council meeting had already decided to reduce the campaign to regional half-day stoppages and limited work bans, and rushed back into talks with the government. The regional stoppages were later cancelled by the AEU executive on the same day that teachers in the ACT announced industrial action.

At the March 24 rally, AEU officials made no mention of the 1,500 Tasmanian teachers who walked out that day over similar conditions. Victorian local council workers were also taking action, while public health workers and doctors were moving toward strikes, demonstrating the potential for a combined struggle against Labor's austerity agenda.

Weeks later, the AEU presented a deal with the government that it declared a major advance. On June 19, however, AEU members rejected the agreement despite the union's misinformation, rushed ballots, censorship and blocking of critical comments on AEU social media.

At meetings, resolutions opposing the agreement had been ruled out of order. No mass meetings had been called.

The June 19 result was the first rejection of a union-endorsed agreement by Victorian educators in more than four decades, sending shockwaves through the union apparatus, the political establishment and the corporate media, which sought to solely blame socialists for the no vote, specifically targeting the CFPE.

The union and the government then repackaged the agreement with minor cosmetic changes, but members rejected it again on July 21, forcing the AEU to call a second 24-hour strike on July 23.

The growing crisis within the Victorian Labor government led to Jacinta Allan's resignation as premier. Her replacement by Ben Carroll signalled a further rightward shift to satisfy the financial elite's demands for deeper social spending cuts.

But that only propelled the AEU bureaucrats to strike the third version of their sellout deal.

After months of restricting industrial action and isolating educators, the AEU bureaucracy turned to scare campaigns. It declared that if the dispute remained unresolved and ended up in Fair Work Commission arbitration, it could produce an even worse outcome.

Politically, it invoked the prospect of a Liberal-National Coalition or far-right One Nation government to pressure educators into accepting Labor's terms.

In doing so, the AEU was propped up and assisted by two pseudo-left organisations, Socialist Alternative's "Socialists in Schools" and the Solidarity group's "Fight the Crisis." Throughout the struggle, they insisted that educators must not break out of the AEU straitjacket, holding out the illusion of pushing the union into seeking a better deal from the Labor government.

After this month's final vote, both groups even insisted that gains were made. "Socialists in Schools" declared teachers had not only won a "better deal" but a "more active and democratic union." Likewise, "Fight the Crisis" claimed it was an "improved offer" and called for "rank-and-file union power," that is, for a faction that could become part of the AEU apparatus itself.

These groups function as the last line of defence for the Labor and union bureaucracy. They seek to keep workers trapped in the union apparatus and the political dead-end of trying to change the course of Labor governments that are totally committed to enforcing the interests of the capitalist ruling class.

The CFPE advanced the opposite perspective—teachers and support staff must take matters into their own hands.

The CFPE's initiation of the Victorian Educators Rank-and-File Committee was an important step forward in this struggle.

Genuine rank-and-file committees must be built—independent of and opposed to the AEU and Labor apparatus, uniting union and non-union workers, and democratically controlled by educators themselves. These committees must share information, formulate demands based on social need rather than what capitalist governments declare "affordable," break the isolation imposed by the bureaucracy and organise unified action with workers throughout Australia and internationally.

Above all, the AEU sellout raises the need for a new political perspective. The assault on wages and conditions is part of a broader austerity offensive, spearheaded by Labor and the union apparatuses amid a deepening crisis of Australian and global capitalism. Workers are being made to pay for staggering corporate wealth, soaring military expenditure and the plunge into war, while public schools, healthcare and social services are increasingly starved of resources.

The only alternative is the fight for a workers' government and socialism: public ownership of the banks and major corporations under democratic workers' control, the expropriation of the billionaires and the redirection of society's resources to public education, healthcare and social need.

The anger that produced two strikes and two historic rejections proved insufficient. The task is to draw the political lessons, establish rank-and-file committees and prepare future struggles on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

To discuss these issues and how to form rank-and-file committees contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE):

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

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

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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