

Australia: Victorian school funding fraud underscores union sellout of teachers

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Barely a month before the November 28 election in the Australian state of Victoria, Labor Party Premier Ben Carroll revealed last week that the state's public schools will not reach supposed full funding until 2034 under a deal with the federal Labor government.

This announcement further exposes the fraud at the heart of the Australian Education Union's (AEU) sellout of teachers and education support staff last month. "Full funding" was one of the central promises used by the AEU bureaucrats to push through an enterprise agreement with the Labor government that educators had twice rejected—the first such rejections of AEU-Labor sellouts in more than four decades.

Under the agreement between the Victorian and Albanese Labor governments, Victoria would lift its contribution to the Gonski Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) from 70 to 75 percent, and the federal government from 20 to 25 percent. But the combined target of 100 percent would not be reached until 2034, with most of the additional funding not even starting until 2029.

The SRS, established by the Gillard federal Labor government's review by businessman David Gonski in 2011, is itself totally inadequate. Yet Victorian public schools remain below it and will remain below it for at least another eight years. That leaves educators and students confronting chronic staff shortages, crumbling facilities, crushing workloads and growing demands for support for students with disabilities as the Albanese government guts the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), especially for children.

Given the mounting working-class hostility to both the Carroll and Albanese governments, this agreement is not worth the paper it is written on. Neither is likely to survive until 2029, let alone 2034. Whoever is in office will be committed to slashing social spending even more to satisfy the demands of the financial markets to reduce government debt, which in Victoria's case alone will

reach almost \$200 billion by 2030.

Labor's funding pact is also tied to pro-business "reforms," such as phonics and numeracy checks and, as Deputy Premier Gabrielle Williams stated explicitly, to "aggressively" seeking "budget efficiencies," that is, deeper cuts.

This is under conditions where the four-year Labor-AEU agreement bans further strikes until 2030. It means teachers and education support staff will continue working 50 to 60 hours a week, with no enforceable workload limits, class-size caps or meaningful reduction in face-to-face teaching.

Carroll's announcement confirms what the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the Victorian Educators Rank-and-File Committee warned: the funding promise was never a commitment to deliver resources to schools. It was a device to help end this year's widely-supported strikes by teachers and education support staff, which threatened to spearhead a wider rebellion by workers.

The 2026 educators' struggle was not only about a continuing cut to real wages. It erupted from a deepening crisis in public education produced by years of underfunding by Labor and Liberal government alike.

After a 98 percent vote for industrial action, more than 40,000 educators struck on March 24. In June, 58 percent of those voting rejected a Labor-AEU agreement. The union repackaged it with cosmetic changes, and members rejected it again in July, forcing the AEU to call a second statewide strike.

This was a rebellion against the AEU bureaucracy itself. The union censored critics, isolated teachers, ruled resolutions out of order, rushed ballots and returned repeatedly to closed-door talks with the government. Then the bureaucracy turned to scare campaigns—invoking Fair Work Commission arbitration and the threat of a Liberal or One Nation government—to stampede educators into acceptance.

Having led the attack as education minister, Carroll was installed as premier in July as Labor's poll numbers plummeted. He was joined by AEU Victorian branch president Justin Mullaly in promoting the prospect of a funding agreement, and the AEU cancelled a planned third strike.

Now Mullaly has hailed the funding deal as "an important outcome for public education," even while saying it "will shortchange Victorian public schools by hundreds of millions of dollars over the next few years."

As the WSWs has documented, governments have used the Gonski SRS scheme to massively overfund private schools while public schools remain underfunded, leading parents to transfer their children to better-resourced facilities, despite paying onerous fees. According to federal government forecasts, private school enrolments are projected to grow by another 21 percent in Victoria between 2025 and 2034, while public school enrolments are predicted to fall.

This is the real content of Labor's education policy: the subsidisation of private colleges and the starvation of the schools that educate most working-class children, including students with disabilities, Aboriginal students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

That is the reality of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's contemptuous declaration that the Victorian school funding deal is "about opening the doors of opportunity wider for the next generation and making sure no child is left behind."

The outcome of the Victorian educators' dispute confirms that the AEU bureaucracy is integrated into management, the Labor Party and the state apparatus. Its function is to isolate and stifle workers' struggles and enforce what governments and the financial markets declare "affordable."

The pseudo-left organisations—Socialist Alternative's "Socialists in Schools" and Solidarity's "Fight the Crisis"—assisted the AEU sellout. Throughout the struggle they insisted educators must not break out of the AEU straitjacket, holding out the illusion of pushing the union into a better deal from Labor. After the final vote, both declared that gains had been made. Now they have remained silent on the full funding fraud.

The CFPE advanced the opposite perspective: teachers and support staff must take matters into their own hands. The initiation of the Victorian Educators Rank-and-File Committee was an important step forward. Genuine rank-and-file committees—independent of and opposed to the AEU and Labor apparatus, uniting union and non-union

workers, and democratically controlled by educators themselves—are necessary in every school to break the bureaucratic stranglehold, unite struggles and prepare a political counteroffensive.

The assault on public education is part of a broader austerity offensive, spearheaded by Labor and the union apparatuses.

While the Albanese government has lifted military spending to more than \$60 billion a year and committed \$368 billion to AUKUS, workers and young people are being made to pay for soaring military expenditure. The resources needed to fund a world-class public education system are monopolised by billionaires and funnelled into war preparations.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is standing candidates in the November 28 election—Morgan Peach and Peter Byrne for the Northern Metropolitan region—to present the socialist and internationalist alternative.

As part of this program, the SEP fights for an immediate 40 percent wage increase to recover past losses, with salaries indexed to inflation; maximum class sizes of 15 to 20 students; a minimum of eight hours of guaranteed planning time each week; full funding for students with disabilities; and the redirection of billions from military expansion and elite private school subsidies into a free, first-class public education for every child.

These demands cannot be realised through appeals to Labor, the Coalition, One Nation or the Greens—all parties of the capitalist class—or through the union bureaucracy that props them up. They require the independent political mobilisation of the working class, in alliance with parents and students, on a socialist program—that is, the expropriation of the banks and major corporations and the utilisation of society's resources to satisfy social need, not billionaire profits.

To take forward this struggle, we urge educators and students to support and get involved in the SEP's Victorian election campaign, to help take these issues out to the widest possible layers of the working class.

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