The socialist answer to the public schools crisis in Victoria

Morgan Peach, SEP candidate for the Northern Metropolitan Region
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None of the capitalist parties standing in the November 28 Victorian state election—Labor, Liberal, One Nation and the Greens—has any solution to the worsening crisis facing educators and students in public schools. Each is committed to deeper cuts, dictated by the banks and corporate elite, regardless of who forms the next government.

The limited promises made by these parties will not solve the chronic problems facing public education—overcrowded classrooms, underfunding, teacher burnout and staff shortages. Successive Labor and Liberal governments, in every state and at federal level, have presided over the systematic starving of funds for public schools, while directing money to the private sector.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is standing candidates to fight for a socialist program, which is the only means for providing the resources necessary for free, high-quality public education for all. Together with Peter Bryne, I am standing for the Northern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne.

In this election, Labor is promising to provide a pittance of $1.17 billion over the next four years to upgrade infrastructure in 228 public schools. But in the decade that it has been in power, “temporary” relocatable buildings have proliferated in public schools. According to a 2025 union survey, 43 percent of all government school buildings are now the ubiquitous “portables”—twice what it was 10 years ago.

Far more telling is the government decision in late October to slash already inadequate Disability Inclusion funding for some of the most vulnerable students in public schools. Estimates by the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the Greens put government savings in the “hundreds of millions.”

Around 45,000 Victorian students receive individual Disability Inclusion support. First, there will be an outright cut of $850 per term—$3,400 a year—for approximately 23,000 students in mainstream schools. Second, there will be a 2.5 percent reduction in student-level funding rates across the board. Third, a tightening of the eligibility criteria will mean that 6,000 to 7,000 students could lose all funding over the next two years, disability organisations estimate.

This money does not go to individual students or their families. It goes to schools, mainly for education support (ES) staff and the adjustments that enable children with disabilities to participate in classroom learning. The result will be fewer support hours, larger workloads and greater pressure on teachers to meet complex needs without adequate resources.

ES staff, who exist on low wages, face cuts to their hours, and many will lose their jobs altogether and the students who depend on them will be left with less support.

Confronted by public outrage and opposition from disability, education and community organisations, the government took a small step back, saying students already receiving funding would keep their eligibility for 2027—a year—before losing it altogether.

The consequences are in many cases life changing, affecting the ability of disabled children to participate in education and, in some cases, to attend school at all. Families will be impacted. Parents and carers could be forced to reduce their working hours or leave employment altogether.

The timing, just prior to an election, is extraordinary. It is a clear signal to the banks, the financial markets and the corporate elite that Labor is prepared to ruthlessly impose deep cuts to essential social services in its scramble to bring down Victoria’s debt levels and maintain credit ratings.

The decision by the Victorian government parallels that of its federal counterpart which is gutting of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), primarily at the expense of children. Of the 241,000 participants slated for removal by 2030, 64 percent are aged 18 or under. Tens of thousands of children stripped of NDIS supports will arrive in classrooms without extra resources or external specialist help they were previously receiving.

Not surprisingly, the bogus argument offered by Victorian Labor government of Premier Ben Carroll is very similar to that of the federal government—the costs are rising too fast,

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aid for those in least need should be reduced or cut altogether. In reality, a vast expansion of public education funding is needed not only to assist children with disabilities but all students and to provide decent wages and conditions for staff.

In another blow to public education, Carroll revealed last month that a deal struck with the federal Albanese government meant that Labor's promise of reaching the inadequate Schooling Resource Standard for funding would not be delivered until 2034—eight years away! The funding promise was a ruse, aided and abetted by the AEU, to help shut down industrial action by Victorian teachers and Education Support (ES) staff who had twice rejected sell-out agreements and stopped work statewide.

The plight of poorly paid and overworked ES staff was a major concern of teachers who voted down the agreements. Part of the final Labor-AEU deal was that teachers would receive time to prepare the onerous paperwork required to just to apply for disability inclusion support—often 20-30 hours of work per student. The promise was vague and will undoubtedly be quickly dispensed with.

To push the deal through, the AEU ran a scare campaign—that rejection of its deal with Labor would deliver a Liberal or One Nation government. In reality, the Labor government's assault on education and other essential services assisted by the unions has generated the widespread public hostility that is now being exploited by the Liberals and One Nation who will only intensify the cuts.

The Liberals' policies promote selective-entry high schools and vocational technical colleges, with no increased staffing, smaller classes or properly resourcing for all public schools. One Nation proposes a narrow far-right rewriting of the school curriculum, expanded trade schools and a pro-business voucher system to channel more students into private, religious and specialist schools.

As for the Greens, the party has condemned the cuts to disability spending and offered a slew of promises—to improve teacher pay and conditions, increase planning time, phase out voluntary fees and expand aides, specialist teachers and school psychologists—that they will willingly sacrifice to expediency of their parliamentary manoeuvres as they have done repeatedly in other states and federally.

The SEP's program

There is no shortage of resources in society. Banks, mining companies and corporations accumulate enormous profits and billionaire wealth soars while governments pour billions of dollars into AUKUS and other military preparations for war and insist public education, health and other basic services must be cut to pay off government debt.

The SEP fights for the expropriation of the banks and major corporations, the ending of funding to the elite private schools and the reorganisation of economic life to meet social needs, not private profit. We demand free, high-quality education at all levels—which includes proper resources for students with disability, for immigrant children learning English, and for every student in the public system.

We demand the reversal of all Disability Inclusion cuts, the employment of thousands more ES staff, pay rises to match the soaring cost-of-living and make up for past losses, smaller class sizes and health professionals in every school. Money for public education, not war!

The SEP urges educators, parents and students to read our, join our campaign and build rank-and-file committees in every school, hospital and workplace—independent of the unions and all capitalist parties—to break the bureaucratic straitjacket.

The future of public education cannot be secured through sham election promises. It requires the mobilisation of the working class to take power and refashion society to meet the pressing social needs of the vast majority not the profits of the super-wealthy few. This must be part of a unified global movement of the working class to overturn capitalism.

We urge all educators and students to attend the SEP's final election meeting this Sunday to discuss these critical questions and the fight for international socialism:

WHEN: 2:30 pm Sunday, 22 November

WHERE: Djerring Flemington Hub, 25 Mt Alexander Rd, Flemington VIC 3031

Register to save your seat!

Can't join in person? Register to join via Zoom.

Authorised by Cheryl Crisp for the Socialist Equality Party, Level 1/457-459 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills, NSW, 2010, Australia.

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