

South Australian public school workers take one-day strike action

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Public school staff in South Australia went on strike yesterday, opposing the state Labor government's drive to impose a significant real wage cut.

Around 5,000 rallied outside the state parliament in Adelaide, with multiple homemade banners expressing educators' determined opposition to the government's wage offer of a nominal pay rise of just 3 percent a year, and its rejection of any meaningful measures reducing excess workloads and abysmal conditions. The strike was approved by a ballot of Australian Education Union (AEU) members last month, with 80 percent voting in favour. It follows the imposition last July of limited work bans in schools.

The industrial action reflects the determination of teachers and school workers to secure a decent industrial agreement. One sign read: "Teacher burnout, this is why we have the turnout."

The *Advertiser* reported comments from two teachers from East Adelaide Primary School. Tracy Merchant, 54, has been teaching for 20 years. She said: "It's the overload of work that's taking us away from the core business." Her colleague, new teacher Alannah Pace, 23, spoke of losing the love of teaching: "The reason I started becoming a teacher is for students' learning and I feel I can't do that because of admin and data collection."

The AEU bureaucracy is responsible for negotiating multiple regressive agreements with previous Labor and Liberal state governments over several decades. The previous deal involved nominal wage rises of just 2.35 percent, a real wage cut, and did nothing to reduce the enormous rate of casual employment nor large class sizes. The AEU only narrowly rammed through this agreement in December 2019, with a 54-46 percent ballot of union members.

The AEU bureaucracy also sabotaged a vote to strike that was held in January 2022. Teachers sought to oppose the forcible reopening of schools amid a surge in

COVID-19 infections, with minimal vaccinations and virtually no mitigation measures, but the union leadership ensured that there was no industrial action despite the initial vote. As elsewhere throughout the country, waves of infection have since swept through the schools.

Conditions within grossly underfunded public schools are reaching breaking point in South Australia, as they are nationally. In November last year, University of South Australia researchers surveyed 1,600 teachers in the state and found that 90 percent had considered quitting, and 50 percent planned to leave the profession within five years. Most reported working more than 50 hours a week, which includes substantial unpaid overtime, with 30 hours of this taken up with non-teaching administrative and assessment tasks.

Chronic staffing problems have exacerbated the crisis this year. According to the AEU, utilising Department of Education data, 35,000 students in the state are without a consistent teacher due to workforce shortages.

The union in South Australia (SA) is in a state of crisis, as it is nationally. Current branch president Andrew Gohl (annual salary \$208,000) was elected in November 2021 with just 726 votes from 13,245 members, or 5.5 percent. He is now posturing as a determined advocate of teachers' interests, maintaining that the government deliver a wage increase of 8.6 percent in the first year and 5.5 percent in the following two years. The union's log of claims also includes a 20 percent reduction in face to face teaching time, and funding for a school support officer (SSO) in every classroom.

The Labor government of Premier Peter Malinauskas has flatly rejected all of these proposals. Government spokespeople have insisted they would cost an additional \$1 billion. Education minister Blair Boyer told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation last month that teachers had to issue requests "which the government could realistically deliver."

The South Australian Labor government is a ruthless enforcer of corporate diktats. Premier Malinauskas, formerly a senior official in the right-wing Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA) union, came to office in March last year while stating, “I said from the start I was going to be a pro-business Labor leader.”

The state has an enormous debt of \$29 billion, with last June’s budget forecasting this to rise to \$37.6 billion in the next four years. The government has boasted of its refusal to raise taxation, with Treasurer Stephen Mullighan publicly appealing to “large corporate employers” to shift to the state. “Why would you choose a high-tax, high-cost location like Victoria when you could come to a place like SA?” he declared.

The Malinauskas government is at the same time an important partner with the federal Labor government on the planned AUKUS nuclear submarines acquisition. South Australian public funds of \$2 billion are already committed, with more undoubtedly to come as Australian imperialism deepens its integration into US preparations for aggressive war against China.

The state’s debt will be clawed back through austerity measures directed against the working class, which are dictated by finance capital through the banks and international credit rating agencies.

This is why the Labor government has dismissed out of hand teachers’ demands for greater funding to improve their wages and conditions. The AEU apparatus has nevertheless sought to cultivate illusions in the state government, as a means of blocking a determined political and industrial struggle against Malinauskas.

AEU state president Andrew Gohl told the rallying school workers yesterday that he expected an “improved” offer from the government within the next fortnight. “If not,” Gohl declared, “then we will need to think about taking further action... We will be a pain in his butt until we get an offer that values us.”

This amounted to rhetorical hot-air. The only actions outlined at the strike rally was that teachers should walk out of schools if there is a visit from a Labor parliamentarian, and that people should email the premier to “demand a better deal.”

Yet another AEU-organised sell out agreement is threatened. The unprecedented crisis of the public education system in Australia has been engineered through two primary mechanisms: (1) federal and state budgets, implemented by successive Labor and Liberal governments, that starve public schools of resources while

funnelling billions into private schools, including the most elite; and (2) state-based industrial agreements covering public school teachers that function to reduce real wages and enforce abysmal working conditions.

Most recently, in Victoria, the AEU last year rammed through a four-year agreement, despite a record 40 percent “no” vote, involving massive real wage cuts, with salaries nominally increasing by just 1 percent every six months. In New South Wales, the Teachers Federation shut down a strike campaign, the first in the state for a decade, and instead campaigned for the installation of the Labor government. This was nothing but a dead end. Since coming to office, Premier Chris Minns has refused to make any significant concessions, and teachers are without an agreement.

In South Australia, as nationally, teachers and school workers face the urgent task of taking their struggle out of the hands of the bureaucracy by constructing rank-and-file committees in the schools. A network of these democratically elected organisations, independent of the union apparatus, will organise the broadest democratic discussion within the schools on the necessary next steps.

A determined turn must be made to educators nationally, combined with a turn out to other sections of the working class confronting similar attacks. Yesterday’s teachers’ rally coincided with a snap strike of tram drivers in Adelaide, who are resisting an attempted corporate imposition of a real wage cut through a nominal rise of 3 percent a year. This underscores the opportunities for a unified political and industrial working class campaign against the Malinauskas government.

The only organisation fighting for this perspective is the Committee for Public Education. We encourage South Australian teachers and school workers to contact us to discuss the way forward:

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