

Step in the right direction

By Pat Byrne
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The announcement from the government of a new public sector wages policy is a positive step: the \$1,000 salary cap has been given the boot and replaced by 2.5 per cent across the board. This is a welcome return to a percentage-based increase for SSTUWA members.

However, while the new policy allows for an element of bargaining, this is in a very limited way. Unions can bargain for an additional .25 per cent on top of the 2.5 per cent, which is expected to come from within the existing agency budget. For education, this is particularly problematic, given that the vast bulk of education funding is already in schools.

This means there is much still to do to get the outcomes needed, especially around matters of workload, well-being and safety.

As we head into the new school year with industrial actions likely to commence (see directives on next page), it is worth reflecting on where we have come from in the past few months. To recognise some significant wins and to prepare for the hard negotiations still to come.

On 8 October 2020, with no consultation, the state government announced in the budget that it was extending the \$1,000 pay cap it had imposed four years earlier on public servants. The cap would run for two more years, with promises of a review after 24 months doing nothing to soften the blow.

The SSTUWA, along with other public sector unions, had borne the brunt of budget repair and had then worked tirelessly keeping the state going during the COVID-19 pandemic. The extension of the \$1,000 salary cap without any consultation, was a slap in the face.

It became clear as the SSTUWA headed into negotiations over new General Agreements for both schools and TAFEs, that a coordinated approach was needed.

Within the union, planning began for what developed into the Give the Cap the Boot campaign – aimed at getting the state government to scrap the \$1,000 salary cap and reinstate proper bargaining processes.

This process began with a survey of all school members to find out what the key issues were for members. It revealed that 81 per cent of respondents had considered quitting teaching, with workload, wellbeing, safety and salaries being core issues prompting such considerations.

At the same time, months of conversations came to fruition with the formation of the Public Sector Alliance. As well as the SSTUWA, the membership of the Public Sector Alliance included UnionsWA, United Workers Union, CPSUCSA, United Firefighters Union, WA Prison Officers Union, Health Services Union WA, Professionals Australia and the Rail Tram and Bus Union.

The message to the state government was clear. Public sector workers were fed up with being taken for granted. They wanted recognition of the burden they had carried during budget repair and the work they had done to help WA during the COVID-19 pandemic. Above all they wanted a return to bargaining in a fair, reasonable and timely manner on the issues of salaries.

As the launch of the Alliance at the SSTUWA office showed, public sector unions were united, determined and ready to fight for the basic right to negotiate agreements; to not be dictated to.

Inside the SSTUWA there was a layered strategy being put in place. At one level we needed to show the government how serious the situation was becoming. With skills shortages across the state, education had a crucial role to play. The SSTUWA was the only public sector union invited to the state government's skills shortages summit.

At the same time we launched a member focused campaign – Give the Cap the Boot. Through District Councils union representatives and other individuals put their hands up to drive that process as part of our new Campaign Crew.

Members were asked to show their support in a range of ways. They visited MPs, wore their Give the Cap the Boot t-shirts, their Only Cap I'll Wear caps and spread posters and stickers around their schools.

The response was magnificent. Hundreds of schools and thousands of members took part in a hugely successful social media sharing of the actions. This was complemented by op-eds and media interviews as well as advertising across print, radio and television.

During State Council over 100 delegates and organisers helped pack Perth Town Hall for a Public Sector Alliance rally that drew widespread media coverage. Member Heather Riseberry (pictured on page 4, bottom right) personified the efforts of thousands of members by overcoming her nervousness to share her story of why educators needed a proper pay rise.

All of this effort worked. First the government brought forward the salary cap review process to October-November. Face-to-face and written submissions from the SSTUWA and other unions put the case strongly that public servants deserved a proper, negotiated pay rise.

Then, during the final week of the school term, the government's new wages policy was announced – an initial offer of at least 2.5 per cent plus other options. Crucially, the Premier has committed to a broader bargaining framework.

With the TAFE Agreement having expired on 15 December, both sectors are yet to receive a formal offer from government. Other than salary, both claims have focused on workload as the core issue for members. Well-being must be addressed as must safety in the workplace.

What we have done though is shown that in unity with other unions, with our membership working together and with strong leadership we can make not just a stand, but a difference.

If you are not already a member we need you to join. We need workplaces without union delegates to change that by creating formed branches. We need you to Get Organised.

We have had a significant win. Now we need to build on that.