

Strength through solidarity vital

It has been a big year for public educators, but 2022 promises to be even bigger and it will be critical for the SSTUWA and its members to remain strong, united and committed in order to tackle the challenges that will come its way.

That was part of the message delivered to delegates attending November State Council Conference, held recently at the SSTUWA building.

State Council Conference is a two-day event where union members, elected as conference delegates, engage in professional development and discuss and decide the issues pertaining to the direction and activities of the SSTUWA. It is the union's highest making decision body and convenes twice a year.

At November's State Council Conference, delegates heard from SSTUWA President Pat Byrne and AEU Victoria Branch President Meredith Peace about the state of public education, ongoing wage negotiations and how public educators have dealt with the impact of COVID-19. Dr Mike Newton spoke about wellness and education.

Delegates also participated in a rally at the Perth Town Hall, in support of the Public Sector Alliance's (PSA) campaign to have the state government's current wage cap policy removed.

The union is currently negotiating two new General Agreements, each for schools and for TAFE, while also campaigning for better work conditions and its own Give the Cap the Boot campaign, which supports the PSA's campaign.

Ms Byrne said SSTUWA members had responded strongly to actions under both campaigns, with partial success being achieved in September when the state government announced it would bring forward its review of the wage salary cap by two years. (Read more on page 10.)

"We saw the way our union works when we were united in a common cause," she said.

"Thousands of you have rallied behind the Give the Cap the Boot campaign."

"I have absolutely no doubt that all of those actions, plus direct lobbying by the Public Sector Alliance unions at numerous meetings have had a direct influence on the announcement from the Premier."

At the PSA Town Hall meeting, SSTUWA members joined hundreds of other members from other unions to call for the wage cap to be removed. They heard from union members being impacted by capped wage rises, including State Council delegate Heather Riseberry (pictured bottom right on this page).

"I think it is really important that we understand that the unity we have demonstrated through this alliance is having a significant effect on government thinking," Ms Byrne said.

In 2022, campaigning at the state and federal level for proper funding for schools is set to continue and there will be a federal election held by May next year.

"In the lead-up to this election no mention of education funding has been made," Ms Byrne said.

"There is no reason to expect that there will be any change to this position, given that the federal (education) minister has stated that the funding wars are over."

"This is critical to us for public education given that the bi-lateral agreements are up for negotiation next year. If we don't get an opportunity to renegotiate the parameters of a new funding model, public schools will be set back for a further four years. The federal minister's own former school received \$540 million in recurrent funding in the last year, \$128 million from the federal government."

Ms Byrne said the SSTUWA had commissioned a report from economist Adam Rorris which showed that up to \$327 million a year will be lost from public schools if the current funding model continued.

"Continuation of the current funding model will exacerbate the huge divide (between public and private schools) which

currently exists,” she said.

Ms Byrne urged members to continue speaking to their local and federal members of parliament to raise awareness of public education funding shortfalls, while the union would continue its efforts to get a commitment from the state government to increase funding.

It was confirmed to State Council Conference that the SSTUWA has announced a policy to support mandatory vaccinations for public educators.

“This union will stand by any member who has a legitimate exemption from the chief health officer and who is victimised,” Ms Byrne said.

“We will do our best to ensure that every opportunity is given to members to access vaccinations in time to meet the deadlines.

“However, people should not expect their fellow union members to fund legal challenges or take industrial action to support efforts to avoid vaccination.”

Finally, at November State Council Conference, life membership was conferred to long-time and committed unionists Bill Kilner, Edd Black and Kim Dullard.

Kim’s conferral was posthumous as the well-regarded school leader and former SSTUWA school leader organiser passed away in April this year. His nephew Heath accepted the honour on Kim’s behalf.

Ms Byrne said the SSTUWA was all about its members and what they did for each other – and the three life members inducted embodied the spirit of unionism.

“It is a spirit that we’ll need to demonstrate over the coming months,” she said.

“I’m confident that we are ready for what I think is going to be a long campaign.”