

New alliance for fair public sector pay: June 2021

Western Australian public sector unions have formed a new alliance, comprising public school teachers and support staff, health workers, prison officers, firefighters, engineers, community service workers and those in our rail system, among others.

The Public Sector Alliance (PSA) will work to reform the WA government's wage capping policy. WA's current state wages policy imposes a cap to salary increases, meaning a decline in real terms for six years for the vast majority of those we rely on to deliver essential health, education, community safety and other services.

The PSA was launched at an event hosted by the SSTUWA earlier this month, which was attended by union leaders and members. Leaders signed a statement outlining their cause and showing their commitment to the alliance.

UnionsWA secretary and PSA spokesperson Owen Whittle (pictured below) said the six years of pay rises, which failed to keep pace with cost-of-living increases for the vast majority of the public sector workforce, was unacceptable to working people and their unions.

"It's an unfair policy that undermines morale and goodwill at a time when we rely heavily on their commitment to keep us safe during the pandemic, as well as their leadership of our economic recovery," he said.

"We can't afford an economic recovery that fails to improve pay. We need to ensure that everyone's pay improves during our recovery.

"By necessity, working people spend their pay to meet costs of living and pay increases are an important driver of our local economy."

Mr Whittle said the existing wages policy contrasted unfavourably with government's own policy on government fees and charges, announced to increase by 1.6 per cent overall.

"As a practical example, someone on an annual salary of \$65,000 or more is worse off if their pay only rises by \$1,000 while their overall costs of living rise by the 1.75 per cent predicted to be the rate of inflation in 2021-22," he said.

"The state wage policy pay rise cap at \$1,000 means that many low, all average or higher income working people in the public sector are worse off – their pay is going backwards compared with their costs of living, and for at least six years.

"Of course, many essential health, education and community safety workers with professional skills and qualifications are on an income around or above the average.

"At a time of skills shortages, we need their skills and to keep those skills and experience, pay needs to be competitive.

"Our public sector workforce and their unions are calling on the government to enter into good faith negotiations and abandon its wage fixing policy and return to genuine enterprise bargaining with the public sector.

"No other working people in WA have their pay decided by their employer without any bargaining or negotiation."

Recent data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows pay rises have been modest over the past year, nationally at 1.5 per cent and with WA lagging behind that at only 1.4 per cent.

"This data also shows that while the private sector wage growth is at a low 1.5 per cent, WA's public sector pay is the weakest in the nation rising at only 0.9 per cent," Mr Whittle said.

"The pandemic and economic recovery have posed challenges requiring governments to be quick-footed, decisive and effective.

"WA can't be safe and strong with a poorly paid workforce that loses skills to the private sector because of a wages policy set four years ago in a different era.

“The original intention of the pay rise cap – announced after the 2017 election – was to repair budget finances.

“Partly at the expense of the public sector workforce, that budget repair job is now done.

“The Public Sector Alliance has succeeded in aligning a wide range of public sector Enterprise Bargaining Agreements (EBAs) covering over 100,000 working people in the WA public sector that are due to end in 2022.

“These EBAs cover public school teachers and support staff, health workers, prison officers, firefighters, engineers, community service workers and those in our rail system, among others.

“In the past public sector campaigns have included industrial action, TV and radio advertising, door-knocking and phone calls.

“No campaign strategies are off the table at this point.

“The Public Sector Alliance has committed to an industrial and political campaign for fair pay that will continue as long as needed.”

The membership of the Public Sector Alliance includes UnionsWA, United Workers Union, CPSU/CSA, United Firefighters Union, WA Prison Officers Union, State School Teachers' Union of WA, Health Services Union WA, Professionals Australia and the Rail Tram and Bus Union. Other unions are expected to join this growing alliance.

Authorised by Mary Franklyn, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.

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