Responding to the climate crisis

By Sharmila Nagar
Vice President

Research shows more than three quarters of Australians are worried about climate change. Recent bushfires and widespread floods in the eastern states have highlighted the urgent need for action, which is backed up by a new United Nations report on climate change.

The latest report from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) takes a disturbing look at the most up to date science on climate change. Written by leading climate scientists, the latest IPCC report emphasises the ongoing damage that climate change is already causing and how it will worsen if not acted upon.

Online panel discussion on IPCC report

An online panel discussion was held recently by Australia's Climate Council organisation to present and discuss this report, particularly chapter 11, which covers Australasia and the current climate crisis in the Torres Strait Islands.

The findings from chapter 11 of the report include:

- The impact on some natural systems experiencing irreversible change in Australia. For example, the Bramble Cay melomys (pictured below) is the first mammalian extinction due to human induced climate change.
- An increase in the frequency and/or severity and/or duration of extreme weather events.
- Changing flood risk – pluvial (flash flooding from high rainfall) and fluvial (river).
- Escalating impacts and risk of wildfire and other extremes – frequency and severity of dangerous fire weather conditions will continue to increase.
- Loss and degradation of coral reefs, kelp forests in South Australia and alpine biodiversity.
- Increase in heat-related mortality.
- Disruption and the decline in agriculture production (southern and eastern Australia).
- Failure of institutions and governance systems to manage climate risks.

Impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Torres Strait Islanders are on the front line of the climate crisis and urgent action is needed so that they can remain on their islands. Our Islands Our Home is a campaign led by Torres Strait Islanders to protect their island homes.

Eight claimants from Zenadth Kes (Torres Strait Islands), also known as the #TorresStrait8, have brought a complaint to the UN Human Rights Committee over the federal government's inaction on climate change.

The claimants want the federal government to:

1. Fund adaptation programs that will allow Zenadth Kes communities to adapt to climate impacts.
2. Commit to 100 per cent renewables in Australia in the next 10 years.
3. Support Zenadth Kes communities to build community-owned renewable energy.
4. Transition away from fossil fuels as rapidly as possible through a just transition for workers.
5. Push the world to increase global ambition and keep warming to less than 1.5 degrees.

We encourage SSTUWA members to share your views about how the union should support these claimants and address climate change in general.

The SSTUWA response

Your union is already gearing up for further action in relation to education and climate change. A list of 15 recommendations from the SSTUWA's response to the Education and Health Standing Committee – Inquiry into the response of WA schools to climate change was endorsed at December 2021's Executive meeting.

These include:

- SSTUWA support of the framework outlined by Education International and a call for the Australian government to deliver on our commitments to climate change education and education for sustainable development in the Paris Agreement (article 12) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (targets 4.7, 12.8 and 13.3).
- The establishment of a joint consultative committee with SSTUWA representation to develop and progress climate change education and action and sustainable practices for infrastructure and maintenance of public school and TAFE sites.
- That the diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) understandings about sustainability and caring for country be actively sought and used to guide the design and implementation of local, regional and national climate policies and initiatives.
- That genuine and on-going consultation is held with ATSI communities to ensure that their knowledge and understanding of climate, climate change and sustainability is incorporated into curriculum resources and teacher education.
- That the Department of Education assist and support all schools and require them to include sustainability in their operational plans as an area of priority. This should involve the setting of targets to reduce our ecological footprint through consumption of resources, the recovery and reuse of existing resources and by encouraging more sustainable consumption and waste management.
- Staff and students in WA public schools and TAFEs being provided with opportunities to engage in meaningful climate change education and sustainability activities to assist in managing eco anxiety.

The SSTUWA has established a working team that is looking at implementing these recommendations and will continue to provide updates to members.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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