Gains made through united front, work continues

By Pat Byrne
President

As an affiliate of UnionsWA, the SSTUWA has long known that strength lies in unity; the multiplier that applies when unions work together towards common goals.

If more evidence was needed of this simple truth it comes from the success of the Public Sector Alliance.

Success? Yes. Thus far the Public Sector Alliance (PSA) has been the driving force behind not one, but two changes to state government wages policy.

Instead of a $1,000 increase for each of the two years of the 2021 General Agreement, public sector workers were offered three per cent increases in each year and a one-off cash bonus of $2,500.

For SSTUWA members on under $100,000 this represents in the first year a 5.5 per cent increase, not the one per cent that was on the table in July 2021 when negotiations began.

Make no mistake, without the powerful and cohesive presence of the PSA it is highly unlikely that the state government would have budged from its original $1,000 stance.

Great credit goes to UnionsWA Secretary Owen Whittle and his team.

Bringing together so many public sector unions, including the SSTUWA, United Workers Union, CPSU/CSA, United Firefighters Union, WA Prison Officers Union, Health Services Union WA, Professionals Australia, the Rail Tram and Bus Union and WA Police Union was no easy task.

Each union has a diverse membership that spans an incredible range of occupations, salary levels and backgrounds. This brings different demands and requirements.

Every union involved has at times had to balance those specific needs with the common good.

When one union has undertaken actions every other alliance member has been there to offer support.

From the launch at the SSTUWA offices, through to the Town Hall meeting in November, various individual union actions and the rally at Parliament House in August, the collective voice has been loud and strong.

Applying a diverse range of actions has led to some good outcomes. Prior to formally agreeing to the state government offer the SSTUWA stipulated that such agreement was on the condition of guarantees that any further improvements would be passed on to teachers and leaders. This has meant not only the SSTUWA, but other unions who had signed agreements, have benefited from those assurances.

Has the outcome thus far been perfect? No. Was the manner in which the most recent offer was made acceptable? No.

In August the WA Labor Party released its 2021 Platform. In that document as the seventh of 20 “Enduring Labor Values” the platform states: “We are committed to protecting and advancing the rights of working families, including their rights to join trade unions, to organise in the workplace, to bargain collectively and to exercise their right to strike. Our partnership with the trade union movement remains crucial for Australia’s future.”

Just a few days earlier the Premier had, with no consultation, released via the media the latest changes to the state government wages policy. This is not how bargaining collectively works. Nor does it foster any type of partnership. The message from the PSA is: don’t dictate, negotiate.

The latest wages policy will offer immediate financial relief to some public sector workers; it will not however address what has been a long-term decline in real wages for the sector, a decline that is seeing workers desert the public service for private industry. The staff shortages this is creating are being felt across schools and TAFEs.

We will continue to work with the PSA to ensure all public servants start to catch up with the cost of living after several years of having salaries capped as a budget management strategy. Above all, we are seeking a return to genuine bargaining.

Striking a balance between immediate salary relief for members, plus a significant set of gains in working conditions and the need for proper long-term and real pay rises has not been easy. The Agreement and Exchange of Letters set out several large pieces of work to be completed by the parties.

These include:

- A major expansion of the transfer pool.
- A review of the Country Teaching Program eligibility requirements.
- A review of portable ICT devices in schools.

Both parties - the department and the SSTUWA - have committed to a series of meetings to ensure completion of these projects as soon as possible.

The Agreement and Exchange of Letters prvovide several ongoing avenues for negotiations to occur around education support, ICT matters and individual member’s concerns, to name a few.

These are the ways the SSTUWA directly contributes to the development of professional learning and performance management processes and of course, state and federal initiatives.

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