# Small step taken on a long journey

SSTUWA
State School Teachers' Union of WA

## 'The pandemic has shown that it is those who keep our hospitals, schools, trains, buses and community support running

## in times of crisis who are the heartbeat of our economic and business community'

In accordance with discussion at State Council this will be a broad-based campaign based on the following:

That the SSTUWA maintains its membership of, and support for, the Public Sector Alliance goal of removing capped public sector wage increases, thereby enabling a return to genuine good faith bargaining.

That, irrespective of the outcome of the SSTUWA ballot regarding the AIP, the SSTUWA puts the Premier and state government on notice that, due to:

- Teachers falling further and further behind the cost of living in real terms because of the impact of the $1,000 per annum wage cap imposed by the government in 2017 and salaries failing to match the current explosion in the cost of living;

- Unsustainable workloads being experienced by school leaders and teachers due to more and more unreasonable expectations being placed on schools, a situation which has been exacerbated by the pandemic over the last two years;

- The structural failures within the system – such as staffing levels, regional resourcing models, insufficient time for planning and collaboration, inadequate preparation for new teachers – which act as deterrents both to the attraction of new entrants to the profession and the retention of experienced teachers and leaders;

- The lack of sufficient central support to schools, particularly in relation to behaviour management issues, a situation which has been inflamed by the pandemic as children's anxieties are increasingly presenting as disengagement and poor behaviour to the serious detriment of the well- being of school staff;

SSTUWA members will engage in a range of actions from the commencement of Term 3 2022 to draw the attention of politicians and members of the public to the concerns of principals and teachers in WA public schools.

The campaign will have four elements:

- **A political strategy**
  This will include member actions to write to and visit local MPs, highlighting the concerns facing the profession and the need for a coordinated government approach to address those concerns.

- **A workload strategy**
  Member actions at school level to draw attention to staff concerns regarding workload.

- **A community strategy**
  This will be aimed at raising levels of community awareness of the pressures facing the teaching profession andwhat is needed to improve the status of the profession and support teachers and principals, through improved funding levels so that teachers and school leaders are properly supported and remunerated.

- **A media strategy**
  This will include paid advertising, through social media and traditional media formats aimed at highlighting issues such as workload, attraction and retention and workplace safety including members telling their own stories.

**There will be a review by the SSTUWA**

to identify the detailed response needed to revive public education in the post- COVID-19 area; the actions required not just to deal with what COVID-19 has wrought, but to identify and tackle the fundamental issues such as the long- term underfunding that put the system in such a precarious position when COVID-19 came along.

This will be no easy task. Our General Agreement 2021 is just one small step on what continues to be a long and difficult road.

**By Pat Byrne**
**President**

On Friday 17 June, member voting closed on the Agreement in Principle for the 2021 General Agreement (Schools). Just over 5,000 members voted with 70 per cent of those voting in favour.

The union has also received a written undertaking from government that any subsequent change in wages policy will also be passed onto teachers.

This has been one of the most intense General Agreement processes I can remember. I would suggest members have rarely had a more difficult decision to make when it came to casting their vote. I know this was the case for Executive when making its decision.

It is worth considering the timeline and what has happened across the period of the negotiations, which we should remember began in the deep shadows of COVID-19.

On 9 June 2021 the SSTUWA joined with a number of other public sector unions from UnionsWA to form the Public Sector Alliance.

The alliance was formed to seek an end to the state government's $1,000 salary cap, which for more than four years had seen WA public sector workers fall further and further behind the cost of living whilst being forbidden from bargaining or negotiating the rate of their salaries.

Introduced in 2017 to assist in budget repair, the $1,000 salary cap was scheduled to run for at least two more years, to 2023. For SSTUWA members that would have meant a third General Agreement under the yoke of the $1,000 cap – meaning pay rises of under one per cent for the majority of our members.

Just over 373 days ago there seemed little prospect of the salary cap being removed. The alliance changed all that. By September the prospect of 100,000 public sector union members coming together had prompted the state government to announce a review of its wages policy.

In December the state government announced the $1,000 salary cap was gone. A new wages policy of 2.5 per cent plus either a one off $1,000 payment or an extra 0.25 per cent over each of the two years, was made.

That policy was formalised as part of an overall agreement in response to a Log of Claims from the SSTUWA seeking to reduce workload and red tape and improve the safety and well-being of members.

These measures were sought in response to mend a system that had seen teachers stretched further and further by ridiculous workloads, the pressures of which were being exacerbated by COVID-19. When we asked members what mattered most to them, the answers were unequivocal.

Of those who responded to our State of Schools survey, 81 per cent had considered quitting the profession. Workload and personal health and well- being were the key reasons for such deliberations for 87 per cent and 60 per cent of respondents, respectively.

This response was underlined through District Council consultations. The new GA needed to address these issues and do so urgently. The employer dragged its feet, leading members to undertake a range of actions. This prompted the employer to make two offers. The first was rejected, the second recommended for agreement in principle by Executive after long debate, balancing the far from ideal salary component with some significant first steps to addressing workload and well-being matters.

The member vote was carried out against a backdrop of a federal election in which soaring inflation, rising interest rates and a call for significant wage rises for those on the minimum wages came to dominate debate. Inflation in WA is now running at over seven per cent. Interest rates are up, rents are up, fuel is up. Food is more and more expensive.

The SSTUWA is aware of this. Even as the EBA vote continued the union has reaffirmed its commitment to the Public

Sector Alliance. We are keeping the pressure on the state government to acknowledge the obvious – the economic picture has changed dramatically since the decisions it took on salaries in December.

If it wants to keep what it describes as “essential public services” going then it needs to show respect for those workers and review the salary offer.

The state government also needs to show it understands that SSTUWA members are not indicating approval of the salary component of the Agreement in Principle (AIP). Acceptance of the pay rate is grudging at best – it’s better than nothing, but nowhere near enough.

The SSTUWA now continues its twin aims of ensuring public education gets the funding required to address core issues brought to the surface by COVID-19 and to end forever the use of public services as a budget management tool, rather than the delivery of vital services.

Working with the Public Sector Alliance, the SSTUWA is aiming to get rid of salary caps under government wages policy, with the aim of seeing education, health, community support, transport and other public services treated as vital cogs in the state’s economy, not just as easy targets for cost-cutting.

The pandemic has shown that it is those who keep our hospitals, schools, trains, buses and community support running in times of crisis who are the heartbeat of our economic and business community.

For too long it has been all too easy to disparage public sector employees. Disrespected, underfunded and stripped of the support they need by a succession of governments; it was teachers, health care staff, bus and train drivers and the myriad other public sector workers who kept WA going. Yet even as ministers were discovering this truth and describing what public sector workers did as essential, the same people were being expected to continue to live with $1,000 salary caps.

Now, as the SSTUWA moves to get improved salaries for its members, along with significant but still far from sufficient changes to workplace practices, it is crucial to remember that this is just the first step.

COVID-19 has shone a light onto situations which were unacceptable in 2019 and which are even worse now.

We have an education system beset by chronic underfunding, staff shortages, a lack of respect for educators and all too often broken students who have given up on education altogether or whose deep- seated distress manifests as violence against their peers and school staff.

Staff already at breaking point were thrust into the frontline of managing schools during COVID-19. First staying open while others worked from home, despite their own health concerns, then leading the community in terms of getting vaccinated to keep schools going, then managing contact-tracing and dealing with parental expectations about kids while staff numbers plummeted as fellow teachers became ill or had to isolate.

Remember all of this was against a backdrop of the then Prime Minister and successive education ministers displaying a blatant disregard for the teaching profession.

What we also know is that the long-term effects of COVID-19 on our education system are only just beginning to be understood.

Surveys, such as that by Save the Children Australia, are starting to pull back the curtains on a serious crisis for Australian youth – a youth disengaged from study and education. As usual the greatest burden falls upon the less well off and, in turn, on the public system.

This is why the SSTUWA will be leading a broad discussion on what public education needs to recover and reboot – with funding, respect for the profession and proper support programs right at the heart of the matter.



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