State Council focuses on public education



June State Council Conference was the largest in recent times and befitting of celebrations held during the event to mark the SSTUWA's 125-year anniversary.

The conference was attended by more than 140 delegates, the largest in almost a decade, and held at the Parmelia Hilton hotel in the city.

The guestlist was significant, with ACTU Secretary Sally McManus and AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe in attendance. Early Childhood Education Minister Sabine Winton (also Minister for Child Protection; Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence; Community Services - representing Premier Roger Cook) and Meredith Hammat (Parliamentary Secretary to the Deputy Premier, Treasurer, Minister for Transport, Tourism and Minister for Education, Aboriginal Affairs, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs - representing Education Minister Tony Buti) also spoke at the conference.

State Council Conference is held twice a year, in June and November, and is the SSTUWA's highest decision-making body.

Elected delegates convene for two days of discussion and decision-making about the union's direction and activities, with an element of professional development added to the schedule.

The conference also celebrated the SSTUWA's 125-year milestone with a reflection event involving past union presidents at the end of the first day.

SSTUWA President Matt Jarman opened June State Council Conference by restating how important public education is.

"Public education develops and nurtures far more of the important contributors to our well-being, our health system, our community services and our economy than any other system," he said.

"Public education has a magnificent story to tell – and yet that story sometimes doesn't appear to be heard. As we approach another funding campaign and EBA I am concerned public education is sliding down the political agenda."

Mr Jarman said the SSTUWA initiated independent review into public education in WA was to redress this and prompt

discussion and workable solutions around those issues affecting state education.

“I am also absolutely confident that the state government knows of the reaction the review has generated and how that response is a signal that public education is seen to be an absolute priority by the WA community,” he said.

Mr Jarman welcomed the appointment of the new WA education ministers, as well as that of new Premier Roger Cook, stating his confidence that they would speak up for public education.

“[But] the SSTUWA needs to be the loudest voice of all for public education, not just for our members, but for all educators and above all, for the two-thirds of Western Australian students who are educated in the public system,” he said.

Mr Jarman also spoke of the union’s support of the Voice to Parliament, the Public Sector Alliance’s push for a review into public sector wage caps, the intrusion of for profit private education providers into the public system, public school funding and the start of negotiations for the next schools and TAFE General Agreements.

AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe followed and spoke to June State Council Conference about the importance of building early childhood education and the TAFE sector.

She also reaffirmed the union’s continuing campaign for full funding for public education, stating the Albanese Government had not yet guaranteed to the 100 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) and was also reviewing the National School Reform Agreement as well.

There was a real risk that the Commonwealth and state governments could carve out deals that did not achieve the 100 per cent level, she said.

“Right now we have to finish the job. This is our chance – we have to get the ALP to deliver on the promise of Gonski that was made in 2012 to the children of Australia,” Ms Haythorpe said.

“An entire generation of whom have been in schools which have not received the funding to back in that promise.

“And when we achieve that 100 per cent of the SRS, when we win, only then will Prime Minister Albanese’s vision of no-one being held back and no-one being left behind be realised.”

Rachel Bos, from the ACTU, spoke to the conference about the upcoming Voice to Parliament referendum and the support from Australia’s union movement for the yes vote.

“We are seeking a momentous change but also a very simple one,” she said.

“It is not a matter of special treatment or preferential power. It’s about consulting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on the decisions that affect us and our children.

“This is a simple courtesy, common decency because it speaks to the values we all share and honour: fairness, respect and decency.

“Enshrining a voice will be a national achievement. It will be above politics. It will be a unifying Australian moment, it will be a test of who we are.

“All of us will have a chance to exercise our democratic right and our basic human responsibility to vote for better.”

An update was presented to June State Council Conference on the Review into Public Education by panel review chair, Dr Carmen Lawrence.

Dr Lawrence said the review had received over 140 submissions from teachers, support staff, representative bodies and education specialists from across the state.

“We believe we have a pretty comprehensive sample of opinions of teachers and school leaders in Western Australia,” she said.

“What struck all the panel members was the commitment, the professionalism and the enthusiasm … of teachers in seeking solutions to the problems they identified and looking beyond their own circumstances to approve the operation of the education system for the benefit of all students and staff.”

Dr Lawrence said the panel was currently analysing the submissions and the various ideas from meetings, as well as reviewing published reports and data relating to the terms of reference, before publishing their findings and position.

ACTU Secretary Sally McManus spoke about the current cost of living crisis, worsened by rising inflation and interest rate

hikes.

“You would think that from listening to the news and all the economic commentators that the reason why we have got an inflation problem is partly somehow to do with workers, even though all of us are suffering the biggest real wage cuts in recorded history,” she said.

Ms McManus said a report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development that week had stated that corporate profits were a big driver of inflation in Australia, and arguments that rising costs were due to market conditions could be countered with the argument that pay rise claims were a reflection of market conditions as well.

She said: “Last week when the trade union movement of Australia won the biggest increase to the minimum wage ever, 5.75 per cent for our lowest paid workers, what did some of those employer groups do?

“They blamed cleaners, aged care workers, and said that what the Reserve Bank has done is because you are getting a pay rise – to make working people feel guilty for getting a pay rise that is even less than inflation – it is still a real wage cut.”

Ms McManus said the trade union movement was campaigning for new laws that would increase the job security of Australians and stop employers calling permanent jobs, casual.

“Ongoing jobs should have ongoing rights – stop the use of gig economy … we want to put a total stop to that,” she said.

Ms Winton and Ms Hammat spoke to conference later on the first day. They congratulated the union on its 125-year anniversary and reiterated the new Cook Government’s commitment to support public educators and the profession.

“This government is as committed and as energised as ever to continue the good work of the last six years,” Ms Winton said.

Ms Hammat said: “You do incredible work, such important work and I want to thank you for everything that you do, day in, day out.”

By Minh Lam

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