National education and union news

Good news for NT public schools

The Australian Education Union (AEU) has welcomed news that the NT and federal governments are committing to full funding of public schools and said the investment was urgently needed.

AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe said the current funding situation was shameful with NT public schools receiving the lowest proportion of Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) funding, despite having the highest levels of student need.

“This funding is long overdue and will change lives in the NT. The bulk of the funding must be delivered well before 2029 because we know that teachers and students need resources now,” she said.

“The Albanese Government’s commitment to provide 40 per cent of the SRS funding for the NT is a just recognition of its superior revenue raising capacity and its responsibility to ensure every child across the nation gets the support they need to succeed.

“The Prime Minister must also ensure that the bilateral agreement signed this year removes the loophole in the current agreement that allows the NT to artificially inflate its SRS share by four per cent by including non-school costs such as capital depreciation.

“That Morrison-era loophole is denying NT public schools $40 million a year and Labor was clear in Opposition it would eliminate it from future agreements.

“Public schools need full not fake funding.”

AEU NT Branch President Michelle Ayres said full funding would make a huge difference across the NT.

“Funding NT schools at 100 per cent of the SRS means extra support for students with complex needs and those at risk of falling behind, more teachers, counsellors, support staff and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workers,” she

said.

“We urgently need this investment to help every child in the NT succeed and we commend the NT and federal governments for taking the lead to deliver full funding.”

Ms Haythorpe said the Albanese Government needed to now lift its funding offer to Tasmania, Queensland, Victoria, NSW and South Australia from 22.5 per cent of the SRS to 25 per cent to ensure they reach 100 per cent of the SRS by 2028, at the latest.

“Public schools also need federal government capital funding. Across the nation, private schools will get $1 billion in extra capital funding over four years but public schools will get nothing after this year unless the Prime Minister steps up,” she said.

Ms Haythorpe said an expert panel convened by education ministers in December reported that there was an “urgent and critical” need for full funding of public schools and it was the first step towards ensuring all students receive the support they need. The panel said full funding must be delivered across the country “within a comparable timeline”.

ACTU calls for increase to minimum wages

The ACTU announced it will seek a five per cent increase in Australia’s minimum and award wages as part of its submission to the Annual Wage Review.

Each year, the Fair Work Commission hears from unions, employers and governments before setting minimum and award wages for about 2.9 million, or one in four workers, which comes into effect on 1 July 2024.

Workers on awards are about $5,200 worse off after inflation has eaten away at their pay rises over the past three years, despite recent positive increases in award wages.

The ACTU claim would help workers meet current price rises and make up for the lost income over this period.

The ACTU submission argues that business can afford this fair and sensible increase, especially as levels of profits are well above pre-pandemic levels.

The claim would also have no negative impact on inflation, partly because the wages and hours of some of Australia’s lowest paid workers are modest. Indeed, last year was the biggest increase to the minimum wage in over 40 years, and inflation dropped by 3.7 per cent.

The increase would especially benefit women and part time workers, as three in five award workers are women and two-thirds are part time.

A five per cent wage increase would lift the minimum hourly rate to $24.39 and the minimum annual full-time rate by $2,295 to take it to $48,200.

ACTU Secretary Sally McManus said: “The lowest paid workers are the ones who are the hardest hit by inflation, they need a five per cent pay increase to start to get ahead again and make up for the real wage losses over the last few years.”

“When inflation goes up businesses are able to adjust their prices to protect their margins, but workers’ pay does not move so easily,” she said. “This is why the annual wage review is so important, it is when the lowest paid workers have the chance to catch up, the result makes an enormous difference to millions
of families.

“A five per cent pay increase is fair and reasonable. For some perspective, the CBA posted a $10 billion in profit last financial year. It could pay for the entire union wage claim for 2.9 million workers of five per cent and still be one of the most profitable businesses in the country.”

All workers should be protected from discrimination

The ACTU welcomes the Australian Law Reform Commission’s (ALRC) recommendation to protect students, teachers and other workers at religious educational institutions from discrimination.

The report on religious educational institutions and anti-discrimination laws was delivered to the Attorney-General in December after the government’s commitment to amending the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* and other federal anti-

discrimination laws, including the *Fair Work Act 2009*.

The report recommends removing exemptions in the Sex Discrimination Act, which permit religious schools to legally discriminate based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and marital or pregnancy status, and aligning the Fair Work Act to be consistent with these changes.

The ALRC was tasked with delivering recommendations for an anti-discriminatory framework for religious educational institutions to ensure students and staff are not discriminated against, whilst also allowing these institutions to build a community of faith by giving preference, in good faith, to persons of the same religion as the educational institution in the selection of staff.

Importantly, the ALRC recommended that such preferencing should only be allowed where it is reasonably necessary to, and proportionate to the aim of, building or maintaining a community of faith, and where it would not be unlawful under the Sex Discrimination Act.

The report follows a consultation process with religious institutions, unions, legal experts, the education sector, and other organisations, with the aim of recommending legislative reforms that safeguard rights and freedoms in international agreements Australia is a signatory to, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

ACTU Assistant Secretary Liam O'Brien called for an end to the exemption that permitted religious educational institutions to discriminate against workers based on their sexuality, gender and relationship or pregnancy status.

"Unions believe that these reforms are necessary and should happen as a matter of urgency. All working people should be protected from discrimination, whether that is based on their gender, sexuality, religion, or any other attributes. People should be employed on their merit, and all forms of discrimination are unacceptable," he said.

"Unions welcome further discussion with the government about the design of the recommendation's provisions as well as future religious discrimination laws.

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