

Helping hands

Education support staff are gaining recognition and improved conditions as they join the AEU and fight for their rights. **Diny Slamet** reports.



Education support staff are the unseen, underappreciated, underpaid and yet often overworked members of school communities. As administrative assistants, classroom aides, library assistants and financial officers they ensure schools run smoothly and effectively. Over the past year, the AEU has launched campaigns to address the often appalling working conditions of education support staff and the union has had some early successes.

In Victoria, after a year-long campaign, school support staff have won major concessions in their new workplace agreement. The wins include pay increases of between 5.4 per cent and 11.5 per cent, improved leave entitlements and allowances, one-off payments of between \$100 and \$1000, an agreement to improve consultation and, significantly, job reclassifications that will make it easier for contract staff to become permanent.

The School Services Officers Agreement will also deliver as much as a 34.5 per cent pay rise to the very lowest paid support staff—those classified as SSO1-1-1 and whose pay scale has hovered close to the minimum wage. Under the agreement, this bottom classification will also be abolished.

Kathryn Lewis, the Victorian AEU's organiser for education support staff says the campaign's success has largely been made possible by the growing number of school support staff joining the AEU since the campaign began. An additional 900 support staff joined the union during the campaign.

Lewis is still urging more support staff to join up. "Despite our significant growth, our membership density is still well below where we would like it to

be. When we come to negotiate agreements, our capacity to mobilise members is really important in putting pressure on government and we have seen our increased membership in the recent campaign assist in this area," says Lewis. "We need to keep building membership numbers to ensure the government does not use this as an excuse to ignore the claims of support staff."

Cheap labour

Rob Durbridge, senior industrial officer with the AEU's federal office, says the AEU has to prove its worth to SSOs in competition with other unions. "The AEU is the only union with organisation in every school across Australia to assist support staff who face difficulties such as high levels of casual and contract employment," says Durbridge.

"Campaigns this past year have demonstrated that teachers will stand up for support staff and that benefits can flow as a result, such as improved career paths, tenure and pay. But there is a long way to go; the recognition that is due to support staff will not come from employers who see them as a pool of cheap labour."

This is a sentiment echoed by Linda Wishart, the AEU's Tasmanian support staff organiser, who says a cultural shift is required both in schools and in education

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departments to stop thinking of support staff as little more than glorified "parent helpers." It's time, she says, that the role they play is recognised and valued as vital for school success. ▶

Your say

Sharon Giles

Teacher aide, Tasmania.

I work with high needs and special needs children, sometimes working with as many as six in a class. I am about to enter my 14th year working in the same school where I have been permanent since 1999.

Because of the unpaid stand-down I used to claim Centrelink benefits for the summer break. Two years ago Centrelink put me into the Employment Plus job network and I had to look for 10 jobs a fortnight over the Christmas break and provide proof that I had actually applied for those jobs.

I was made to go on job search courses, learn resumé presentation and had all this money spent on me that could have been better spent on somebody who actually needed it. It was a waste of my time and their time because who's going to employ somebody for an eight-week period at full adult wages when they can get school leavers for so much less?

Now I just save my money in a Christmas club every week so that I don't have to go to Centrelink any more. I've been involved in the campaign against the stand-downs for eight years. When I wrote to the previous education minister she replied that the situation had been such for 30 years and she didn't see any reason for changing it.

► When Wishart took up her current position two and a half years ago, Tasmania's support staff had some of the worst working conditions in the country. Not only was the average wage at the time just \$13,000 a year, but support staff were stood down without pay for 12 weeks a year. A former school support officer herself, Wishart takes the cause very personally, using the pronoun 'we' when referring to the people she is working for.

Wishart says that standing down people without pay who can barely make ends meet, with no regard to how they will fare during the weeks they are unpaid is appalling. Like many of the casual and contract support staff around the country, most support staff in Tasmania do not know whether they have a job to return to at the beginning of each year.

The average wage for support staff is now \$16,000 a year and the stand down period has been reduced to 10 weeks a year. Recently, as a result of AEU negotiations, 930 contract staff were made permanent. But Linda Wishart believes this is just the beginning. These advances have already led to a 20 per cent jump in membership, with the AEU now covering 56 per cent of all support staff in Tasmania.

Unpaid work

In South Australia, the hard fight continues. Arbitration on the latest employment agreement is due to start in May, and the Industrial Commission has meanwhile awarded an interim pay rise of 3.75 per cent payable from 28 January 2009. School service officers (SSOs) are looking for a 21 per cent pay rise over three years, a recognition

Your say



Sylvia Ganosis

Education support officer, Victoria.

We would like people to recognise that support staff are a part of this union, body and soul. We are a part of the AEU and we are a part of the education system, but sometimes we feel overlooked and not included. In Victoria, more education support staff are members of the AEU than TAFE members or early childhood members. We know that the union is working for us, but the wider community know little or nothing about our work responsibility, our issues or us. We would like to see language that is more inclusive in union meetings and workplaces. Often the word 'teacher' is used when what is meant is 'staff'. Yes, there are issues that relate just to teachers, but sometimes there are issues that relate to all staff; the word teacher just does not feel inclusive.

I am not a teacher by choice. I love my job as an education support person and the satisfaction that it brings. With 20 years of experience behind me, I look forward to the future and the experience that I will enjoy with both my work and the AEU.



Leanne Nielsen

Special school teacher aide, Adelaide.

Permanency is a very big issue for a lot of SSOs, and it's a particularly big issue for me. I have worked at the same school on contract for 11 years and I am now entering my 12th year. It means at the end of every year when everybody is coming up to celebrating Christmas, I'm worrying about whether I've got a job. We have no guarantees at the end of each year and a lot of it depends on enrolments and budgets. I'm lucky at my school because we sign 12 month contracts but there are a lot of SSOs who sign term contracts so they have only 10 weeks of guaranteed work. Then they're out of a job.

Work/life balance is another big thing. There are just so many demands on our time and not enough hours in the day. Our teachers are under the pump so it filters down to the SSOs to help prepare for classes and liaise with parents. In a special school, you can add personal hygiene to that, therapy services and assisting with getting equipment right. There aren't enough hours during class time to do all that so the expectation is that we work through our break, or we work after school, or we come in early.

There's a huge expectation that we'll give up our time without pay or compensation.

“We need to keep building membership to ensure the government does not...ignore the claims of support staff.”

of unpaid hours worked and greater levels of job permanency. (Of the almost 5500 SSO positions, only 1990 are permanent despite many SSOs being in the same job for as long as 15 years.)

On the issue of unpaid hours, Anne Crawford, vice president of the AEUSA, says school budgets don't have anything spare for overtime so SSOs are simply expected to do unpaid work.

A new funding model proposed by the South Australian government giving principals complete control over budget allocation is also causing Crawford concern. "We believe this will work badly against SSOs. More than a third of schools will experience funding cuts and if you have principals having to make decisions about staffing cuts, they're faced with the dilemma of having to cut SSO time to avoid cutting teacher time. Cutting teachers would, after all, lead to an immediate increase in class sizes," she says.

"A huge number of SSOs work in primary schools with children with special needs or with challenging behaviours and cutting their jobs will not only have an impact on the individual child being helped, but will negatively affect the other children in the class and the workload of the teacher," says Crawford.

"If you cut administrative SSOs, teachers will have to take on an increased number of admin tasks that take their focus off their core business of teaching and learning. The work of school leaders will also become more arduous and they are already very overworked," she says. ●

Diny Slamet is a freelance writer.

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