

President's report 2020 AGM, HSU

It is difficult to report on a year that has been so momentous and that has generated so many clichés without falling into some of them. It is a year when the perfectly lovely name Karen became associated with meaning a predominantly white middle aged woman, often of generation X who is regarded as having an entitled, condescending and often racist attitude (it's Macquarie Dictionary's word of the year). On behalf of all the wonderful Karens out there, let's drop this one and let it fade away.

There have been so many words and phrases that have peppered our year and entered our conversations as we became couch based epidemiologists and commentators – pandemic, R numbers, lockdowns, social bubbles, face masks, hand sanitisers, Covidiot, doomscrolling, rona, zoom, "you're on mute", COVID normal, new normal, iso, driveway celebrations, G2G permits, pivot (my personal pet hate word) and in our environment in particular, PPE.

It is a year that has redefined who we think of as essential workers and exposed the idiocy of a society that has become dependent on a casualised, insecure, low paid workforce, where people have no option but to work multiple jobs and work even when sick. Ensuring access to paid pandemic leave is a vital public health measure.

As a society we learned what union members already know – having a strong voice and working as a collective towards a common goal is critical to our wellbeing. In a perverse way the pandemic is the best recruiting tool unions have had for many years. For some, the union value-proposition has not always been evident but in this pandemic unions have shown that we work not just for individuals but what we do delivers fairness and equity more broadly.

Internally the Union has risen to the challenges of the year, working from home in the early days and establishing new communication channels so that contact with members could be maintained. COVID-19 information resources were added to the Union's website and essential support was provided uninterrupted.

We've farewelled Chris Panizza our Assistant Secretary after 31 years of service and we've welcomed Adrian Barrett into that role. Gilbert Reed, a stalwart in the private sector team retired after 23 years of service. David Shaw our longstanding Committee of Management Treasurer retired after 20 years of service and Suvi Bird stepped up to take on the role. John Shehade stepped down from the Committee and as a national counsellor after 13 years of service. Naomi Kefford has been appointed Senior Industrial Officer and we've also appointed Michael Lee (a law graduate) to increase capacity in representing members.

Naomi McCrae and the team worked with the United Workers Union, the AMA and Unions WA to successfully lobby the WA Government to amend the Worker's Compensation and Injury Management Act to ensure that workers would be presumed to have contracted the virus at work should they test positive. This is an essential protection.

Negotiations on the new two year public sector agreement were protracted but ultimately concluded and agreed to by the membership in a vote. It's fair to say that

though there were some important wins on conditions we are unhappy with the Government's wages policy and this will be a focus going forward.

In the private sector there has been some very poor industrial relations behaviour displayed by some employers. These workers need advocacy and protection from HSUWA and recruitment of new members has been strong.

HSUWA has been active locally and nationally on a variety of policy fronts. Locally we put in a submission and appeared before the WA Climate and Health Inquiry. Nationally the HSU has produced reports, submissions and statements on a variety of issues that impact on members including industrial relations, superannuation, aged care, disability and bush fires. National affiliation with the HSU and the ACTU extends our capacity to influence the policy debates that affect our working and home lives.

New challenges are on the horizon with the Government using the attention-diverted pre-Christmas time to drip feed elements of the omnibus industrial relations bill to the media. From what we have seen so far, there will be struggles ahead to protect wages and conditions. Today, Sally McManus from the ACTU described the changes as "dangerous and extreme" and "seriously unbalanced". This time, "we're all in this together", needs to mean working people banding together to fend off changes to legislation that will make us and our society more inequitable and poorer.

On your behalf I'd like to thank Naomi McCrae, Adrian Barrett, the industrial and organising teams and the essential administrative support staff for their work for us over the last year.

The Committee of Management members have been diligent in providing oversight and governance of the union for members. They have your interests at heart. Their role is critical and they take their responsibilities seriously. We've had some change to Committee membership which is good for renewal – but private sector representation would be welcomed.

A safe and happy Christmas to you and your families. We hope for a COVID contained 2021 as we strive to build back fairer.