

# Calling all Community and Public Sector Union members: Unite and fight to be paid what we are worth!

In mid November, the widely loathed wages policy arbitrarily set by the government was replaced with a new policy — it is even **worse** than one it replaced!

The new policy caps the wages of all of us — the 150,000 workers who make up the Federal Public Service — to the Wage Price Index for the private sector. Gone is the 2% cap on pay increases, replaced with a cap that looks set to be lower for years to come and that will lead to the public sector lagging behind and contributing to the general wage stagnation.

Traditionally the public sector sets the trend for wages across the economy with the private sector following. But in the period immediately after the Global Financial Crisis, the government imposed deep austerity on its workforce and, for a while, private sector wages outstripped the public sector.

We are now living through an era of prolonged wage stagnation in **both** the public and private sectors. Unions prepared to buck the anti-worker industrial relations rules that were designed to **produce** this very outcome are few and far between.

**A decade of lost opportunity.** Public sector wages have long been in the doldrums. It is crucial that members of the CPSU draw the lessons.

Agency bargaining has **always** been a problem for public servants as it weakens the hand of workers by mandating bargaining agency by agency, rather than as a single workforce. Agency bargaining produced many flawed outcomes. Amongst them, a yawning gender pay gap with agencies that have a female dominated workforce paid significantly **less** than agencies with a great percentage of male workers.

Worst off was Aboriginal Hostels Ltd, which with the largest First Nations workforce, was the **lowest** paid of all!

The 30th of June 2011 was a historic date. With end dates of agreements across the APS aligned, there was a sense of anticipation amongst union members. Strength could finally come from uniting across the public sector to win the pay outcomes workers deserve. The government imposed a highly restrictive bargaining framework. With the workforce better

strategically placed to fight than it had been for a long time, instead of calling democratic mass meetings to debate how to defeat the unfair restrictions, the National Executive of the CPSU kept the membership bargaining agency by agency in silos, missing the opportunity to unite

and **fight to win!**

As workers in some agencies — desperate for a pay rise — accepted less than satisfactory agreements, the strategic opportunity was lost. Unionists in other agencies fought on. Some, like those at the Bureau of Meteorology, took strike action. But they were on their own. Unionists in the Department of Home Affairs also walked off the job and were forced into binding arbitration at the (Un)Fair Work Commission. The

period has been one of pay freezes of varied durations from agency to agency.

Then in 2018, the Department of Industry tried to sideline the union altogether proposing a determination under Section 24(1) of the Public Service Act. This little known clause allows an agency head to make a determination on pay and conditions within the bargaining framework. Before workers knew it, these disempowering and retrograde determinations were all the rage across the sector. In most agencies, the union leadership was passive, declaring to members faced with two rotten options, “it’s your choice.” But the choice of a genuine fight back was never on the table.

**Right:** CPSU members in DIBP stop work, 1 July 2015.

**Bottom:** CPSU members in ABS stop work in August 2015.

**Flip side:** Marching to demand a pay rise, October 2018.

*Photos from the personal collections of CPSU-CAAN activists.*



By April 2020, when the government announced its 6 months pay freeze, the response from the leadership was little more than a series of press releases and a few memes on social media. This was despite the serious long term impact the freeze will have on pay. The Australian Centre for Future Work estimates that for a public servant mid career who plans to work for a further 20 years, the freeze will cost them more than \$23,000 over their working life.

**Pay us what we are worth!** The latest attack is a slap in the face to public servants who have been flexible and worked hard, many in dangerous frontline roles, to deliver for the public during a pandemic. The official messages of appreciation ring hollow when they are accompanied by wage austerity.

*Crikey* describes the wages policy as a “fiscal own goal” by the government, noting “the Prime Minister gave us all tax cuts so we could spend more. Now he is making that extra spending harder to achieve.”

While the official budget strategy is to encourage stimulus, the reality is that there is a massive transfer of public money going to big business and the super rich. What we are seeing is company profits up during COVID-19 while workers, including public servants, are taking home less. The share of national in-come going to workers has fallen below 50% for the first time since 1959, and the COVID recession is making this worse. In the last quarter, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, company profits have **increased** by 14.9%.

**What is to be done?** We need to urgently reverse this trend, and this starts by being **active** in our own workplaces and also building grassroots networks across the union.

We need to encourage workmates who are not yet members of the union to join and work with us to call for what's needed. We need to speak up and demand that our voices be heard — **we are the union.**

While we can vote in elections, grassroots **collective** democracy is in short supply in the CPSU. If there are not places where members can discuss and organise, we need to **create them ourselves.**

If you are not a delegate yourself, speak to your delegate and let them know that you are ready to organise to demand we are paid what we are worth. If you are a delegate, talk with your members and find out what they think. Get connected — share home email addresses and phone numbers. Technology such as video platforms make it easier to connect than ever before. Organise a discussion about the ideas in this leaflet. Pass a motion capturing the views of members about the new wages policy, and send it to the national executive.

We need to build solidarity amongst all workers — both public sector and private sector. This includes all those performing roles for the government outsourced to the private sector and those who work alongside

APS workers who are engaged as contractors or casual labor hire. When workers are fighting for better pay outcomes and need our solidarity, we must support them. Take up collections in your workplace for workers who are on strike.

Get involved in the CPSU Cross Agency Activist Network (CPSU-CAAN). We are a group of members, activists,

delegates and section councillors from right across the APS who are organising to make our union stronger and more democratic and effective.

Under the government's new policy, things are set to get a whole lot worse, unless workers get organised and resist this latest attack. Workers have done so in the past, and we can do it again. We don't need permission, we just need to organise collectively.

There's nothing truer than this union slogan: **Dare to struggle, dare to win! If you don't fight, you lose.**



**Issued by the  
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