

Introduction

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Solidarity is a feeling. It's a feeling that is hard to define, but union members know it. It's the essence of why we are unionists. It reflects our collective commitment to fairness, justice, equality, respect, dignity and safety. As unionists, we recognise that every member matters, their material conditions matter, and our public schools matter. We feel pride in solidarity because we know that we will fight for each other, forever.

A union is its members. In this publication reflecting on our union's achievements over its first 50 years, we are pleased to share stories from members giving their accounts of significant moments in their union journey.

A theme that emerges from these contributions is that of empowerment, particularly for women members. For many, the union is where they gained confidence, inspiration, friendship and opportunity. It is through the union that members became agents of social change. As you will read, this has not been without its challenges. We don't always agree with each other, and we sometimes have formidable forces working against us. These memories bring to life the myriad ways tensions were navigated. Some challenges were stage-managed or bulldozed, some required inventive, delicate or pragmatic approaches.

Every story in this volume represents a member's life, and a snapshot of their journey. We thank all our contributors for their generosity, candour and vulnerability. We hope our current members can see what great shoulders our union stands on.

This 50th anniversary publication also provides an opportunity for us as a branch to take stock and reflect on our achievements over a longer period. As AEU ACT members we take collective action to improve our pay and conditions. So how have we fared? Exceptionally well, thanks to the united efforts of our members.

When our union was founded in 1974, top teacher pay was \$10,077 or \$97,805 in 2024 dollars. Today it is \$121,077 and will rise to \$129,106 by the end of 2025. When our union was founded, school leaders in primary school were paid lower rates than their secondary colleagues. When our union was founded, all secondary and college principal positions were held by men. What would have been the first appointment of a female college principal in 1985 was overturned on appeal. Today, women occupy the majority of college principalships and are equally (but not proportionally) represented as secondary school principals. When our union was founded, promotion was determined by length of service, not merit.

We've secured huge wins in employment conditions providing greatly enhanced access to birth and parenting leave. Today's entitlement to 24 weeks paid parenting leave and superannuation contributions for up to 104 weeks of paid or unpaid leave would have been unimaginable to our earliest members.

Our union has been at the forefront of socially progressive change, winning new employment provisions associated with reproductive leave, gender affirmation, cultural leave and provisions to assist victims of family and domestic violence. We've championed change in relation to workplace violence and abuse, leading groundbreaking work that's impacted all of Australia's school systems.

While there is much of which to be proud, the journey between ‘then’ and ‘now’ has taken twists and turns that reflect evolving social, political and economic times. In this publication our history is told through feature articles covering periods of significant change for our union, interspersed with contributions from rank and file members. In compiling this volume, we’ve learned that the challenges of today have been faced before. We must learn from our history in addressing emerging challenges and pursuing opportunities.

Our early years coincided with a period of rapid and significant change. Second wave feminism saw members tackle systemic sexism in education, curriculum content and subject area availability. In the 1970s, the union movement’s solidarity with First Nations people was evolving, as Indigenous people fought for land rights and established the Aboriginal Tent Embassy. Decades on, opportunities for women and girls have changed radically, but staff and students confront rising misogyny in schools. While we have made huge advances in incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in our teaching, recent AEU research details racism within workplaces, cultural load and identity strain faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members.

Today, the most pressing challenge confronting the profession is the national teacher shortage that shows little sign of abating. This is a monumental failure of workforce planning: entirely predictable, with warning signs ignored like the proverbial boiling frog. When we both entered the teaching profession as career change teachers in 2012, there was an oversupply of teachers and ready availability of relief teachers to cover classroom teacher absences. In a decade, the shortage of teachers and scarcity of casual relief is negatively impacting teacher working conditions. Teachers and school leaders are working unsustainable hours.

The AEU has plenty of work ahead to make our governments fix this situation. With creative thinking, ambitious claims and concerted advocacy, we can win back time for our members. We all need time for our own lives, so we can bring our best selves to the classroom. It’s time to bring back the joy of teaching.

Our history encourages us to think big. Throughout the past 50 years, AEU members stood together in solidarity through some impossibly challenging times, and in so doing, won the pay and conditions we take for granted today – conditions that throughout our history might have seemed unimaginable. Our challenge, then, is to pursue immediate and necessary changes while also taking on what is currently unimaginable. With this mix of pragmatic and creative thinking, our branch will continue to lead the way in its ambitions for a great public education system for the ACT, and decent work for the people who make it happen.

In unity,

Angela Burroughs and Patrick Judge

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