

Workplace contacts

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As a newly appointed Fed Rep at the beginning of 2020, the realities of the role in the midst of the COVID crisis were initially overwhelming.

The main challenge was not knowing exactly how to run a Federation meeting - there are formalities that I have only participated in as a member of Federation, and therefore never really noticed what they entailed.

I had to learn pretty quickly how those processes worked, and was supported by our Organiser, who I communicated with via email. I ended up submitting two separate motions based on members' concerns regarding COVID. It was exhausting but I'm proud we did it.

I was very eager to ensure all voices were heard regarding teachers' health and safety, so we started off with a couple of meetings where members were asked to share their concerns verbally as well as recording them on a shared Google document.

One of the main issues has been the difficulty communicating with members due to COVID restrictions. I have run a few Zoom meetings, which people seemed to find useful.

The submission to the Gallop Inquiry was also a big job, and while I tried to have all members contribute, ultimately I ended up approaching specific members to write sections of the submission, and then I collected them together as a whole.

During my short time as Fed Rep, I've learned that I can be tenacious when it comes to the rights of teachers, and I will dedicate myself to ensuring those rights are protected. I have found that my relationships with staff are pretty solid, and that people trust my leadership in this capacity. That has been really rewarding.

I want to know more, and to be able to do more, and find myself frustrated that I don't have the time to learn everything I think I should know to do this role well. I feel guilty that I can't represent all concerns to my colleagues in a timely manner as teaching is such a time-consuming job.

My former head teacher from a previous school is a Fed Rep, and so is his wife. They are very inspiring people, always committed to the fight for teacher rights.

I have always been a member of the union and engaged in action early in my teaching career. Even so, I surprised myself when I put up my hand for the role of Fed Rep when it became vacant.



It was a bit of an out-of-body experience if I'm honest, as I knew I didn't have time for another role in life, and yet I felt really passionate about the Fed Rep being someone committed to the job. So, I put my hand up and a month later COVID hit; a baptism by fire.

I think if you're really passionate about the rights of teachers, and about the nature of our job – like you find yourself engaging in heated exchanges about teaching conditions, pay, policy changes etc – then it's really worth taking on this role.

It gives you a genuine voice and point of action. Conversely, if you've been a bit cynical about the impact of the union, that's another great reason to take on the role. I think I had a little bit of that cynicism late last year around pay and conditions negotiations, and that motivated me to get more involved so I could have an informed opinion.

Most challenging aspect for most of our members so far this year has been surviving the mess that was the COVID learning-from-home debacle at the end of term 1, into early term 2. I think my approach was to be 100 per cent honest and clear with our members about the impact of the disruption on teachers, and I was really focused on listening to their concerns and bringing those back to the senior executive.

I continue to put on my "teacher cap" when I speak with senior executive about new measures, structures, and expectations for teachers because I want them to be considered in all decisions. I was proud of how I managed to be an effective teacher, head teacher and Fed Rep all at the same time when really the whole world felt like it was in complete turmoil. Many of my colleagues came and thanked me for my leadership at this time, and that was pretty special.

There are two issues that are important to me - teaching conditions and student engagement. I believe that teaching conditions need to improve, that the nature of the job has changed so much in the past 15 years (the length of my teaching career) that it is almost unrecognisable.

The impact of continual policy changes and technology has meant that teaching is a job that consumes your life. I don't think that is healthy for teachers, or for their students. We need to reduce the face-to-face teaching hours of teachers.

It simply isn't possible for teachers to be effective given the heavy burden of administration now additional to teaching workload. The Department continues to introduce new policies, but they don't reduce the time we have to be in front of the class. It's not sustainable, and I'd like to see action around this taken - it is beyond pay, it is our lives.

This leads into student engagement. The Department's introduction of increased compliance measures extending from senior executive down to the activities in the classroom have diminished teacher autonomy, thus affecting their capacity to design learning experiences that meet the needs of their students.

The application of a "scientific" lens to education, where students are reduced to data points, has meant that creativity is lost, and student engagement lost along with it. The passion for learning is being replaced by "learning intentions" and "stretch targets", a worrying trend that makes me thankful my youngest son has almost finished his schooling.

I'm in the union because I am a passionate advocate for public education. I attended public schools, and I have taught in public schools my whole career, and believe that education is a public good, and as such should be public.

I am also an advocate for unionism, a legacy of my working-class upbringing and my concern for workers' rights. My belief is that the union allows for collective strength and community among workers who might otherwise not have support in their workplace.

The NSWTF has shown itself to be proactive in its fight for the rights of teachers and students, and this is something that I am committed to also. I have turned to my union in times where I have felt lost or confused about my role as a teacher, and about my rights in moving forward in my career.

Each time I have sought support, it has been given with generosity and compassion and knowledge, an invaluable service for those working in an industry which can feel overwhelming.

Only a month ago I turned to a dear friend for wisdom regarding the future of my teaching career, having felt increasingly anxious and despondent after the introduction of yet another new education policy - right at the height of a pandemic.

His response was that I needed a hobby! I've been spending the time since trying to identify one that will suitably distract me from the pressures of teaching. At this stage the only candidate that has the potential to that the title of my hobby is reading.

Not very exciting, but that's it! I enjoy reading young adult fiction (especially Australian) and I have an increasing enthusiasm for books on philosophy, metaphysics being my favourite. I would love to write a young adult fiction novel that has a philosophy focus. Maybe one day that will be my new hobby.