Meet your delegate

Hi, I’m Brice Thomson born and bred in the Wellington region. I started working in labs in 1989, the last of the local (day release) Polytechnic trained apprenticeships. After qualifying in Microbiology and Haematology I spent 10 years at the Wellington hospital Lab before moving out to the Hutt Valley Hospital in 2000 where I have worked in Haematology.

All this change has led me to come up with two simple facts I would like to share.

1. Lab workers make a laboratory succeed or fail. A well trained, positive worker provides the service our clients need to be able to function.

2. We do much better as a collective than on our own. Sure, some people annoyingly ride on our coat tails, but without this particular union, we would all be so much worse off.

It has been a privilege to act as both a delegate for our team at the Hutt Hospital site, and as an Executive member to help plan our future in the Wellington region and across the country.

This year has so far presented many new challenges for laboratories in the Wellington region and I hope to be able to offer my support for staff during the ongoing process.

NZMLWU DHB and NZBS MECA

Interest based bargaining was again used as the preferred method of bargaining. After 2 sets of 2-day bargaining meetings in August, a formal offer was presented by the employer to the membership. This was ratified for a term of 36 months and an overall percentage increase of 5% over the term.

Significant changes include a new CPD fund pool based on $600 per registered employee, with work on developing guidelines for the administration and application of the fund referred to NLEG as a project to be completed within 12 months. Training and development was a significant feature of the bargaining on a range of fronts. However there is scant data available on current funds, spending, and information about the types of training that will suit employer and employee requirements to ensure a fit for future workforce. It was decided that this should be another project for NLEG also to be completed within 12 months. Other improvements to the collective agreement include the removal of step 1 of the Assistants scale, a new Higher Duties Allowance clause allowing for payment for all days of 8 hrs worked and full weeks which include public holidays, a minimum 9hr break after call-backs. There were also a number of technical changes including the addition of wording to reflect recent registration requirement changes and changes to the sick leave clause to reflect the Holidays Act. The review of Career Progression was also referred to NLEG as a project.

Southern Community Laboratories (SCL) MECA

The recently ratified MECA now includes Wellington SCL (WSCL) previously Aotea Pathology, Hutt Valley DHB and Capital and Coast Laboratories. Based on current membership data, the largest single group of NZMLWU members is now covered by the SCL MECA. With the powerbase now shifting away from the DHBs, bargaining for the renewal of this collective has posed some challenges as SCL incorporated yet another group of DHB Laboratories into the SCL MECA, and with longstanding SCL employees concerned that cost of integrating new workforces to their Agreement can be at the expense of overall improvements to the Agreement.

Initial rounds of bargaining proved tense with the employer doing little to calm members fears, claiming affordability, reduced funding, the high cost of translating WSCL to the MECA, being unwilling to discuss any solutions that DHB’s have used, and offering a less than favourable initial percentage increase. All this in the face of continued added value by members including propping up the new Wellington Lab through the building project. This was also not helped by the swift DHB and NZBS MECA interest based bargaining, and felt like a slap in the face to members, accordingly an indicative strike action ballot resulted in the majority of members voting in favour of total withdrawal of labour for two days.

However, the employer sharpened their pencil and the Collective Agreement has now ratified. There is a term of 2 years and an overall increase of 3% over the term. Other improvements include an increase to annual leave at seven year’s service, translation of WSCL staff to the Collective Agreement and retention of the WSCL Phlebotomy Scale, T1.5 night extended to the Wellington and Hutt labs, roll-over for one year of shift leave tally where it doesn’t quite meet the threshold, and a review of the CPD process. After a tortuous process the Agreement was strongly ratified by a large majority of members voting for total withdrawal of labour for two days.

There remains much to do at SCL as there are still a number of implementation issues to resolve and the work on improved CPD delivery needs priority.

www.nzmlwu.org.nz  
contact us: support@nzmlwu.org.nz
Potential NZMLWU Amalgamation with APEX

Many of you will have heard of APEX (Association of Professional and Executive Employees), a growth union in health, specialising in the representation of allied, scientific and technical health employees. To date NZMLWU and APEX have had a ‘sister union’ relationship and have amongst other things held combined delegates conferences and exchanged information, such as newsletters to keep abreast of changes occurring in the wider field of allied scientific and technical.

APEX represents just about all other AST professions (other than Laboratory staff) including scientific officers, MRTs, Radiation therapists and physicists, anaesthetists, technicians, pharmacist - through to psychologists, social workers and OTs. Each of these (19) professions has their own division within the APEX structure entitling each to run its own affairs, run by a divisional executive feeding into a whole of APEX National Executive for inter-professional communication and governance.

In answer to a key question for laboratory workers; is this like the PSA? Where the interests of any group e.g. labs are submerged and in practice will not be advanced within a multi-occupational one-size-fits-all collective agreement? 

The answer is NO. This is completely different.

Each division (in our case the NZMLWU division) has control over its own affairs, interests and identity. Most importantly the members in each division control the negotiation of its own collective agreements. As a result, each separate professional group of members, and only those members, negotiate and vote on their own conditions of employment. 

The option of NZMLWU formally joining APEX as a division has been discussed at NZMLWU National Executive level and the following factors have suggested amalgamation should be actively considered:

1. NZMLWU membership has slowly declined and is expected to continue declining as the impact of technology results in fewer laboratory workers being employed. Whilst alternative roles are being planned, these will not overall increase our number.
2. NZMLWU has struggled for some time to secure a full National Executive. Whilst governance and activity at a national level will still be required the trend has continued to be laboratory by laboratory direction and control over issues including bargaining.
3. Maintaining national structures are a cost that could be lessened by joining APEX.
4. Opportunities exist within the APEX structure that would be better captured under the one AST union banner (see below).

APEX’s growth has been achieved through a passive membership strategy i.e. they have not actively sought members. However, this is changing with an active growth strategy launched in 2016.

Given its 19 divisions, APEX is branding itself as “The Allied Scientific and Technical Union in NZ”. An active educational and recruitment strategy aimed at educational providers is planned amongst other things. APEX wishes to target newer members to the professions, as well as picking up existing employees already employed within DHBs and in associated sectors.

From an external perspective, the single union as a one-stop shop for allied scientific and technical has advantages. To be a part of the Allied, Scientific & Technical union may well be a significant strategic advantage in the coming years.

Up against this has been the desire of laboratory employees to retain their own identity. However becoming a division of APEX would not risk loss of identity as laboratory workers given the way APEX is organised through its divisional structure. The NZMLWU brand would remain and as a division of APEX, we would continue to be known as Medical Laboratory Workers, simply with an additional ‘a division of APEX’ for legal purposes. Our logo would remain the same and we would retain control over our direction and future, particularly in bargaining with those for whom we are bargaining.

And the fees would remain the same.

Over the upcoming months, we will be investigating possible amalgamation further. Members of the NZMLWU National Executive are meeting the APEX National Executive on 25th October, and the pros and cons including financial implications are being reviewed.

And we will of course be asking you whether we amalgamate or not, as it is your decision. Have a think about the proposition - have a look at the APEX Website (www.apex.org.nz) and chat to colleagues about what you think. Let your delegates know and/or email us at ask@nzmlwu.org.nz with any questions, comments or queries you may have.

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<th>Pro’s</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Con’s</th>
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<td>Part of a bigger organisation and support structure whilst retaining our own autonomy and identity.</td>
<td>Same fees</td>
<td>Diminished identity albeit we would retain our logo and name NZ Medical Laboratory Workers; it would be as “a division of APEX”, rather than a “union”</td>
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<td>More efficient maintenance of national executive structures.</td>
<td>Retain the same bargaining authority and autonomy</td>
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<td>Protects against increasing fee levels as membership declines and financial viability becomes under threat.</td>
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<td>Involvement in a fresh approach</td>
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<td>Improved association with others in the Allied Scientific and Technical roles</td>
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<td>Managing rising costs as a result of economies of scale.</td>
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