"IT WAS THE BEST OF TIMES. IT WAS THE WORST OF TIMES, IT WAS THE AGE OF WISDOM, IT WAS THE AGE OF FOOLISHNESS, IT WAS THE EPOCH OF BELIEF, IT WAS THE EPOCH OF INCREDULITY, IT WAS THE SEASON OF LIGHT, IT WAS THE SEASON OF DARKNESS, IT WAS THE WINTER OF DESPAIR, WE HAD EVERYTHING BEFORE US, WE HAD NOTHING BEFORE US..."

We live in one of the most beautiful parts of one of the wealthiest countries in the world - what could possibly go wrong? Unfortunately, the answer is: plenty. Sometimes it feels like we're living in a 21st Century version of Charles Dickens' two cities. For all the good things, there are too many bad things. From wage theft to pay cuts, from battles over staffing ratios in hospitals and aged care facilities to attacks on institutions we once took for granted - like the ABC, TAFE or even the local swimming pool. All in all, BMUC members have had plenty to keep them busy over the past year.

CHANGE THE RULES: BMUC members, along with our friends at Penrith Valley Community Unions, were the first group in the country to get behind the ACTU's Change the Rules Campaign. In the wake of national scandals over wage theft and non-payment of entitlements to some of the country's lowest paid workers - particularly in hospitality - the biggest private sector employer in the mountains, we recognise that there's no hope of change until the rules of employment are changed, and organisations like Fair Work Australia stop cutting penalties and deliver genuine justice in the workplace.

SING IT! SAY IT! CHANGE THE RULES: In recognition that the rules working against young people need to change, BMUC is staging a singing and poetry contest on 15th September aimed especially at younger Blue Mts residents - encouraging them to say in their own words what's wrong with the system. We thank Unions NSW ($500) and the Public Service Association ($300) for contributing to the total of $1,000 prize money.

THE RIGHT TO STRIKE: Over the last two decades, as union membership has declined in part due to sustained pressure from right wing politicians and shock jocks, so have workers' rights. Nobody goes on strike lightly but the case of workers running NSW trains shows that under current NSW laws it's next to impossible to take action, even when jumping through all the hoops set out under current industrial legislation. Nobody knows this better than Alex Claassens, NSW Secretary of the Rail, Tram & Bus Union, who'll be addressing a BMUC Politics in the Pub event in Katoomba on August 25.

COVER THE COAL WAGONS campaign began when two members of Doctors for the Environment addressed a BMUC public meeting in Katoomba warning of the health dangers from coal train pollution - later the EPA revealed to us that between 15 and 22 loaded coal trains travelled through the Blue Mountains daily - some up to 60 wagons long. So far, we don't know the level of health risk in our community because there's never been detailed air monitoring along the Blue Mountains rail corridor. Now, after BMUC pressure the EPA has agreed to monitor the Blue Mountains air quality for the first time. The EPA will be staging a workshop and appealing for nominees to join a steering group to oversee the monitoring program.

STOP TAFE CUTS: BMUC Members are supporting the campaign to rebuild capacity of TAFEs to offer high quality programs for *all* students following years of devastating cuts which have meant in Australia overall TAFE's share of publicly funded hours declined from 81% in 2009 to 54% in 2016*. Meanwhile thousands of students were ripped off at the hands of shonky private operators.

FAIR FUNDING IN SCHOOLS: We're also backing the teachers' union campaign for all schools to be properly resourced; as the Fair Funding Now campaign says: "to meet the needs of every child and help them reach their potential".

THE BIG STEPS NOW campaign covers early childhood educators - some of the lowest paid professionals in the country. 97% are women and pay can be as low as $22 per hour.

TAFE, Fair Funding of Schools and early education will all be the subject of our annual Boz and Rod Brooks Memorial Politics in the Pub on October, 6th.

S.O.S - Save our Swims: BMUC members joined swim-ins, petitions and public meetings with a wide cross section of the community in the campaign to save our public swimming pools from closure in Katoomba, Lawson and Blackheath. At the time of writing BMCC has listened and agreed to save all the pools except the two outdoor children's pools at Katoomba. Inspired by the PM's decision to give $10m for a new pool in South Australia we're now examining the possibilities of state or federal funding to ensure the long term future of Blue Mountains of public swimming pools.

ABC CUTS/ FAIRFAX TAKEOVER: It's been a bad year for journalism, with further cuts further undermining the ABC; and the Nine bid to take over Fairfax threatening to make it even harder for journalists to do their job. As the journalists' union, the MEAA says: Fewer journalists=Fewer stories. Fewer journalists means less scrutiny of government, less holding the powerful to account.

BMUC is attending rallies and lobbying in support of high standard journalism as essential to maintaining a healthy democracy.

RETAIL AND FAST FOOD WORKERS UNION: During the year BMUC members met the national leader of a new union covering Retail and Fast Food Workers. Josh Cullinan told us he'd been actively campaigning against wage theft and had already returned more than a million dollars a year to pay packets of members at some IGA and Bakers Delight stores in Victoria. Josh has been recruiting new members in Katoomba.

THANKS: Once again I'd like to pay tribute to our secretary Deb Smith, whose energy and dedication is vital to keeping the show on the road; and all members of the executive for their contributions throughout the year. Thanks also to Carmel Blackburn and the Blackburn Family for their continuing generous support; to Senator Doug Cameron's office for another year backing voluntary union activity in the mountains; to MCRN for auspicing BMUC, and to the Lammimans for again opening their home for the BMUC annual Christmas Party.

THE YEAR AHEAD: With state and federal elections due in 2019, next year promises to be busier still. As Dickens said all those years ago: We have everything before us....

Kerry Cooke
President
Blue Mountains Unions & Community
(Blue Mountains Unions Council Inc)

7th August 2018

*source: Ass Prof Leesa Wheelahan, Melbourne University