The Police Association of Victoria recently secured a pay rise of nearly 19 per cent over four years for its members. Lessons drawn from the Police Association’s success should bolster the bargaining power of unions representing public servants across the country.

Yet, public servants find it difficult to convince the wider community of the value of their labour.

At a time when the reverberations of the global financial crisis are still being felt, taxpayers demand prudent government spending.

It is also important to remember that public servants are not up against those “fat cat” capitalists. There is no Chief Executive Officer earning an exorbitant salary to demonise.

Indeed, the average remuneration of a senior public servant is often higher than the standard salary of a politician who sits on the backbench and even some ministers.

Therefore, the fight is not a typical labour versus capital contest.

**New tactics for an old fight**

How then can a public service union overcome this ingrained disadvantage when entering into wage negotiations?

The recent and somewhat astonishing wage agreement secured by the Police Association of Victoria serves in part to answer this question. The tactics used by the organisation are worthy of consideration.

First, the Police Association effectively held the State Coalition government to account. When you make a promise in politics be sure keep it, particularly in an age dominated by the 24-hour news cycle, a lesson Julia Gillard has learned the hard way recently.

Much fanfare was made over adequately resourcing the police force prior to the 2010 Victorian state election. The Coalition promised to significantly increase the number of police recruits. Tasers and semi-automatic guns were promised to all officers. Enough police officers to attend every burglary, what a world.

However, when the enterprise bargaining agreement expired and wage negotiations began the tabled offer was only 2.5 per cent a year, plus bankable productivity offsets.

The Police Association swiftly responded to the proposal by pointing out that the offer did not even match inflation. In real terms, it was a wage reduction.

**Don’t cross the cops**

Victorian Police Association secretary Greg Davies fought a skilful battle against the government. 

AAP/Julian Smith

The Secretary of the Police Association, Greg Davies, who surely possesses the most powerful moustache in Victoria, called upon the Coalition to honour its commitment to policing.

When this failed the big guns were brought out: a secret audio recording of Ted Baillieu promising police officers a pay increase above cost of living pressures.
Like a deer in the highlights Ted Baillieu was conspicuously quiet on the matter. There were no denials. It was a public relations victory for the Police Association.

Second, the Police Association appealed to the public’s sense of safety and security.

For the Police Association this was a relatively simple task. It required only a limited degree of imagination. Most of us value our safety and that of our family. We want to know that police officers are enthusiastic workers and not distracted by salary concerns.

However, graphic billboards portraying the gashed and bloodied faces of police officers did not imbue the public with a sense of security. The images were direct and to the point. Davies cleverly introduced an element of fear. Should police officers be expected to “take the hits in the street” after being insulted by a sub-inflation pay offer? Clever rhetoric indeed.

Finally the Police Association initiated a process of industrial action.

The actions were proportional and selective. Police officers did not walk off the job or refuse to attend emergency situations. Instead, they were directed to ignore the usual protocols regarding the issuance of speeding fines. While the amounts may not have been astronomical the government risked losing millions of dollars in revenue. Indeed, some lead fools may even have welcomed the measures.

Follow the leader

These three tactics proved to be incredibly successful for the Police Association. By employing these strategies the organisation was able to influence the media coverage with meticulous timing. An almost 19 per cent pay increase over four years is a generous offer and it will delight those in blue.

The success of the industrial campaign will not go unnoted. Across Australia public service unions engaged in wage negotiations will closely examine the tactics employed by the Police Association.

In Victoria unions representing teachers, nurses and departmental public servants have begun to turn up the heat on the Coalition government. In a somewhat cheeky maneuver public servants may indefinitely refuse to brief ministers on possible parliamentary questions.

In New South Wales the Public Service Association is continuing to challenge the validity of the O'Farrell government's new wages bill, which prevents the Industrial Relations Commission awarding public servants salary increases of above 2.5 per cent. It is doubtful that public servants will roll over and accept the wage determination.

Public service unions in Queensland and Western Australia are gearing up to oppose state government’s intent on privatising public institutions. Anna Bligh and Colin Barnett have become the targets of intense union criticism.

In both states seats held by government MPs are being earmarked for special attention.

At the federal level public service unionists working for Quarantine, the Department of Defence, the Bureau of Meteorology and the Australian Communications and Media Authority are in the middle of fierce wage negotiations.

Their representative, the Community and Public Sector Union, has a card up its sleeve as a result of its affiliation to the Labor Party. They will be sure to use it.

In all cases the public service unions involved are conscious of the precedents being set elsewhere. They are calling upon the governments to honour their promises.

They are, and increasingly will appeal to the public’s sense of security. And, of course, all groupings of public servants have the ability to disrupt public services that people depend upon. Get ready for a period of prolonged...
industrial action.

That’s enterprise bargaining.