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# Let's keep fighting

**W**e are now in the midst of the greatest period of social and political

change since Australia's federation. As we anticipated, the Howard government wasted no time in using its Senate majority to push ahead with major legislative change. The last weeks of parliamentary sittings in 2005 changed the Australian social and political landscape like no others.

Parts of the WorkChoices legislation, for example, effectively wipe out the statutory gains made by Australian unions on behalf of workers over the last 100 years. For the vast majority of Australian workers, individualised bargaining is not the answer.

This legislation severely weakens the capacity of unions to bargain collectively. Even where unions are successful in negotiating the hurdles and achieving a collective agreement, it can be undermined at any time by the offering of an AWA.

The legislation also proscribes certain matters from being included in agreements and provides for the federal minister to add to the list of prohibited matters at any time.

This is spiteful and petty legislation.

Many aspects of it will ensure deeper social and economic inequality as well as having

adverse effects on work and family balance.

The Government has also continued its assault on education. In the so-called independent report on Australian curriculum, we're seeing government ideology masquerade as research. Its recommendations evoke yesteryear: there's a greater emphasis on whole-class teaching and teacher-directed activities, prescribed text books, regular testing and streaming of students

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according to exam results.

We are heading towards a one-size-fits-all, quick-fix model.

Quality teaching is an exceedingly important issue, but the government's focus on the quality of *individual* teachers is a cynical attempt to distract voters. It is also moving towards a failing schools policy which sees schools classified as good or bad based on student test performances.

An early casualty of this approach will be quality teaching and learning, as teachers become technicians and more schools focus on passing the tests to the detriment of a broad and varied curriculum.

But all is not lost. Late last year saw a magnificent campaign by

Australian unions—through the ACTU—against the IR changes that generated huge community support. It appealed to our sense of fairness and provided clear examples of how the new legislation is manifestly unfair.

Our members were prominent at huge community protests on 15 November last year. We heard stories of incredible responses from tiny towns where normally no-one ever stops work.

Opinion polls are showing that this is a vote-changing issue. It will be up to us as community members and unionists to keep the momentum going. This will not be easy in an environment increasingly characterised by intimidation and fear.

We in the AEU remain committed to working towards a decent and humane Australia. As teachers and leaders in our union and in our communities, it is imperative that we continue to speak out and encourage others to do the same; to remind us of the fundamental purposes of unionism and education in a free society. ●

**This is an edited extract of the opening address given at the 2006 AEU federal conference. For the full speech, go to [www.aeufederal.org.au](http://www.aeufederal.org.au)**

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