

# The countdown

In this year's federal election, union members will play a major role in deciding who wins government—and the future of public education, reports **KRISTA MOGENSEN.**



**T**his year is shaping up as a crucial time for public education and the rights of workers in Australia, says AEU federal secretary Susan Hopgood. With the federal election later this year, the union is ramping up its public education campaign and also participating in the ACTU's marginal seats campaign.

The union is calling for the defeat of the Howard government. "If we look at the impact of Howard's policies over the past 10 years," says Hopgood, "we see that a further term of office will make it increasingly difficult for us to maintain the quality public education system that we have and that every child deserves".

The union's stand is not only in response to the federal government's pointed under-funding of public education and its repeated attacks on teachers and curriculum. It is also about the industrial relations changes, and what the union sees as a broader assault on Australia's social fabric. "We've made it very clear, ever since Howard announced the industrial relations legislation 18 months ago, that we would campaign for its defeat," says Hopgood.

"We believe that the Howard government must be defeated if

## Birthday vote

Australian citizens who are not enrolled to vote when the 2007 election is called will miss their chance. As a result of laws introduced late last year, the electoral roll will close as soon as the election date is announced.

"The Howard government has changed the rules," says AEU federal secretary Susan Hopgood. "Previously, people who were not enrolled had one week to register." She urges teachers to bring this to the attention of senior secondary students. "We have a responsibility to encourage students to enrol in time, and to make them aware of their rights."

Importantly, students can 'provisionally' enrol as soon as they turn 17. Their name will be placed on the electoral roll and they will be able to vote when they turn 18.

Students who will turn 18 between the announcement of the election and polling day, who have not already 'provisionally' enrolled, will have three days to register.

Enrolled voters can check their details on the Australian Electoral Commission website [www.aec.gov.au](http://www.aec.gov.au)

### Briefly

- **The 2007 federal election represents a turning point for public education.**
- **The Howard government must be defeated.**
- **Union members in marginal seats will play a crucial role in determining who wins government.**

we are to protect the rights of workers in the future, if we are to get rid of the IR legislation, and if we are to ensure proper funding for public education.”

As for union members, especially those who live in marginal seats, every one of their votes count. “Union members across the country have the capacity to influence the outcome of the election,” says Hopgood.

### The push for proper funding

The Howard government’s inadequate funding of public education cuts to the heart of the matter. “Essentially, their policies are the policies of privatisation,” says Hopgood. “They’ve been consistently reducing the public education share of Commonwealth funding,” she says. “If they’d actually maintained the rate they set in 1996, public education would be one billion dollars better off this year.”

A recent government report—from the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA)—has confirmed what the union has been saying for some time: public education is drastically underfunded. The report calculated the shortfall at \$2.9 billion per year.

This year, the union will be calling on all political parties to commit to contributing at least \$2.9 billion in recurrent funding to schools across the nation. The union will also be lobbying—through member education, advertising and alternative policies—to ensure a national approach to early childhood education, improved skills and training opportunities through TAFE and greater support for Indigenous education.

So far there are some encouraging signs that, thanks in

## Stay tuned

Keep a look out for the AEU’s television advertisements that will be screened in marginal seats in metropolitan and regional areas, during the election campaign.



## The ALP’s announcement...of its national education ‘revolution’ is promising.

part to growing community awareness and union pressure on the government, political parties are recognising the high value that Australian voters place on having a robust public education system. The ALP’s announcement in late January of its national education ‘revolution’ is promising, says Hopgood. “The Greens, Democrats and progressive independents are also playing an important role in support of pro-public education policies.”

### Every vote counts

In the lead-up to the federal election, the ACTU is targeting the 22 electorates that require a small swing against the Coalition to defeat the Howard government (see ‘Do you live in a marginal seat?’, p10). Full-time community campaign coordinators have been appointed in each of the 22

marginal seats, through funding or secondments from the ACTU and member unions including the AEU.

“We want all members to understand what these IR laws mean—for themselves, their families and their communities,” says ACTU assistant secretary and campaign director Chris Walton, “but there’s one group of members that are absolutely critical—and that is members who live in marginal seats.”

There are two parts to the campaign: reaching out to the general community and also contacting union members to encourage them to be informed and active about the key issues.

“Our goal is to inform the community about the impact of these laws and encourage them to consider their vote at the next election,” says Eden-Monaro campaign coordinator Peter Malone. “It’s clear that the federal government has no intention of changing these laws and the High Court has made it equally clear there’s no legal challenge possible.

“The only way the Australian people can change these laws is by changing the government.”

But it’s not a call to vote for another particular party. “It is a call to put the Liberals last,” says Malone, “and we would ask them to support only candidates who oppose these laws.”

Queensland Teachers’ Union organiser Barry Welch has been seconded as campaign coordinator for the marginal seat of Bonner, in Brisbane’s inner east, which requires a 0.5 per cent swing—a net swing of around 400 votes—to unseat the sitting Liberal member. “What we’re trying to do is engage people in one-on-one conversations, and explain what this legislation will do to them,” he says. ▶

# Do you live in a marginal seat?

Through community groups, newsletters, street and market stalls, door-knocking, telephoning and encouraging people to talk to their colleagues at work, the campaign aims to raise people's awareness of the grave damage these IR laws are inflicting now—and will in future—on Australian workers and society. People who want to be actively involved in the campaign are also welcome to participate.

"We are encouraging people who are just community members such as grandparents and parents—who may never have been in a union in their lives—to get involved if they want to get rid of this legislation. So it's not a union movement, it's a community movement," says Welch.

## The barest of margins

In South Australia, three seats are held by the barest of margins. In Kingston, for example, it will take fewer than 60 votes (a 0.1 per cent swing) to defeat the current Liberal member. In Wakefield, the swing required is

0.7 per cent; in Makin it's 0.9 per cent.

With up to 2,000 AEU members in each of these seats, teachers clearly have a key role to play, says AEU SA branch president Andrew Gohl. And it's a role to be taken very seriously, he says.

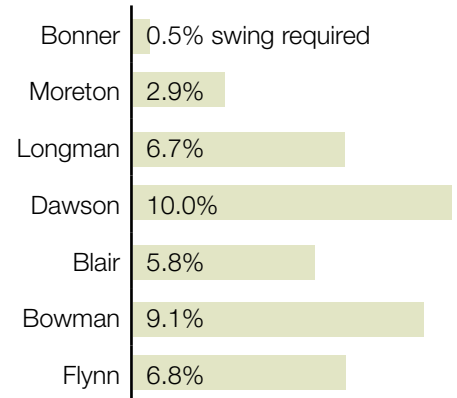
"Some members in South Australia may feel that they're protected because we moved from the federal to the state jurisdiction early last year—but the High Court decision challenges this," says Gohl. "In any case, the Howard government has indicated that, irrespective of jurisdiction, it will exert its influence through funding."

As part of the marginal seats campaign, the union will be contacting members in marginal seats over the next six months to gauge their interest and understanding of the IR laws and the election.

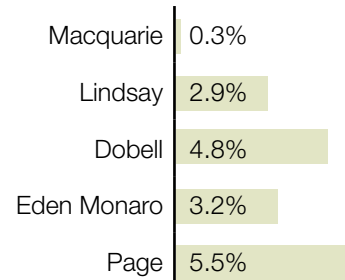
So far the feedback is encouraging. Among members, a significant number have indicated that they are prepared to be



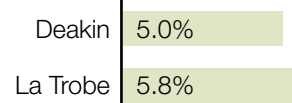
### Queensland



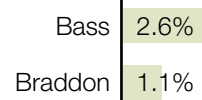
### New South Wales



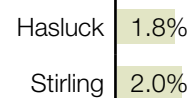
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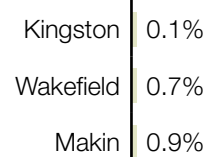
### Tasmania



### Western Australia



### South Australia



### Northern Territory



activists around the Your Rights At Work campaign, says Gohl.

ACTU research indicates that many previous Coalition voters are rethinking their vote because of the IR changes.

“Many union members who voted for the Coalition last time hadn’t heard a word about the IR

laws that we now face—it was not mentioned at the last election,” says the ACTU’s Chris Walton. “We’re saying: even if you respect Howard, if you do, you might decide to vote against the Coalition, because the laws are wrong. You might say: it’s time to put them ‘on the bench for a season’.”

And it’s a view that is spreading. “There’s a lot of intimidation and fear out there,” says Welch. “People who have been attacked under Work Choices have a deep sense of hurt that they could be treated like this, and have nowhere to go.”

“Teachers have said to me that they’re very, very concerned about the type of jobs the kids

they teach are going to have in the future,” says Walton.

“Teachers—and many in the community—understand that you can’t separate the way you treat people at work from the type of community you end up living in.” ●

**KRISTA MOGENSEN** is a freelance writer.



## Your say

**Robyn Parker, Teacher, Bunbury Senior High School, WA**

Over the next few months teachers need to find out the facts about the industrial relations legislation and how it’s going to affect not only them but members of their community. We need to help educate people so that when it’s time to vote they will be informed on the issues and can influence the outcome of the election.



**David Wynne, Trade union training officer, NSW Teachers’ Federation**

It’s very important for AEU members to play an educative role on the importance of rights at work both within their workplaces but also with students. Any workers—whether it’s colleagues in the workplace or students who work part-time, or who are leaving school to go to work—should understand clearly the effect of the Howard government’s changes.





### Resources

- Sign up at the ACTU's Your Rights at Work website for email updates on the campaign.  
[www.rightsatwork.com.au](http://www.rightsatwork.com.au)

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