

Margin works

Around the country, teachers are helping educate voters about the perils of the IR laws, writes **KRISTA MOGENSEN**.

As mid 2007 approaches, the ACTU's marginal seats campaign is in full swing. This community-based campaign, underway in the 22 most marginal electorates in Australia, aims to inform voters about the impact of the new industrial relations laws and to encourage them to support candidates in the coming federal election who oppose the laws.

AEU members are playing an important role, as members of local campaign committees, at street stalls, rallies, and behind the scenes (see box).

Many Australians are wary about the new laws, but trust 'they'll be okay', says ACTU assistant secretary Chris Walton. "It's when they hear the specific detail that they're quite shocked at how bad these laws really are."

The key sticking point is the Australian Workplace Agreement (AWA)—and the instability and reduced pay and conditions associated with them. "Even when a person reaches a deal with their employer through an enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA), the very next day that person, or a new starter, can be offered an AWA on lower conditions," says Walton.

As well, when existing EBA's are up for negotiation, an employer can give 90 days' notice that they will be reducing all pay and conditions to just five minimum conditions. "We all

remember when a deal was a deal," says Walton. "But [not] under these laws."

"You may be okay now, but what happens when the resource boom collapses, or you change jobs, or get a promotion, or your employer decides to cut costs?"

The federal government's announcement in early May of a new so-called 'fairness test' doesn't change the fundamental

problems with the IR legislation, says Walton.

"This tinkering around the edges and offer of compensation is no answer," he says. "There are no guarantees of financial compensation for the loss of penalty rates, overtime pay, public holiday loadings and other cuts to take home pay," he says. "And there are still no new

protections from unfair dismissal."



Democracy alert

For those not enrolled to vote, the electoral roll will close at 8pm on the same day the writs for election are issued. Encourage students aged 17 or over to enrol now. The AEU is running an 'Enrol to Vote: Vote 1 For TAFE' campaign, 'Enrol to Vote for Indigenous Peoples' campaign and is supporting the Australian Electoral Commission's 'Enrol to Vote' campaign. Enrolled voters can check their details at www.aec.gov.au

Momentum gathering

In the Bonner electorate in Queensland, campaign coordinator Barry Welch reports that momentum is gathering in the lead-up to the election. "People now know others who have been hurt by these new IR laws," he says. "They're saying 'this is wrong' and they're not voting for Howard this time."

In the Makin electorate in South Australia, campaign coordinator Tim Palmer says he's hearing stories of people being dismissed by SMS. "These laws allow bad bosses to get worse."

In the Macquarie electorate in NSW, campaign coordinator Daniel Walton has been approached by people who want to take annual leave to help out once the election is called. "We're getting support from all different backgrounds," he says.

And in Australia's most marginal seat, Kingston in South Australia, campaign coordinator John Short reports that the unpopular IR laws and the "arrogance" of the Howard government are capturing broad community support for change. "It's bigger than politics," he says.

There are still many opportunities for people to help out with the campaign, says Chris Walton. "We're going to try and letterbox for the first time 10,000 households per electorate, and we need about 300 volunteers for each seat—for about half an hour, or so—to look after around 220 households."

"It's a practical and positive way for people to get involved." ●

KRISTA MOGENSEN is Australian Educator's commissioning editor.

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- ACTU website: www.rightsatwork.com.au

Your say



Sherry Karban
Wynnum West State School, Queensland

Participating in the marginal seats campaign in Bonner, Queensland

We need to get rid of the Howard government because the IR laws are destroying people's lives. Most people are really worried about what's happening to their family lives, their kids, their jobs. As teachers have become aware of the implications of the IR legislation they have realised the effect it would have not only on their lives but also the social and emotional welfare of the students they teach.

Even parents from school have joined our committee. It's a real community action group.



Lyn Waller
Junior school teacher Year 1-2, The Heights School, Adelaide, SA

Participating in the marginal seats campaign in Makin, South Australia

Somebody needs to speak up for the people who are most at risk from the change to the IR laws—people who fear they'll lose their jobs if they do.

With the working week increasingly deregulated, parents will have to work less family-friendly hours—children's after-school sport will decline, and more children will go into after-hours care. These laws are going to change people's lifestyles—because there are no penalty rates and there's no guarantee of public holidays. The family will suffer.

Many teachers don't think it's going to affect them: yet, at an Adelaide private school, teachers are already being put onto AWAs.

Once families—or friends—are hurt by these laws, people do cotton on. But I don't think they are aware of how far this is going to go. I find it scary. We need to say "this is not what we want for our families. This is not what we want for our society."

Deirdre Lemaistre

Teacher, students with disabilities, Aberfoyle Hub School, SA

Participating in the marginal seats campaign in Kingston, South Australia

People are concerned, particularly about education. They're concerned about reporting requirements and the feedback we have to give to the federal government on student learning—the fact that it's about a 'grade' rather than the full breadth of information. People are concerned that if you don't toe the 'party line', and do what the party wants, schools won't be funded.

I do think it's very important.



Eileen Baldwin
Retired kindergarten teacher, SA

Participating in the marginal seats campaign in Kingston, South Australia

I have always been involved with the union. Even though I'm retired now, I wanted to help. I've just become a grandma to two little girls, and I've got to protect their education and their work. I'm doing things in the background, like helping prepare the 'show bag' but also holding placards at rallies. I've been twice when John Howard's been here, and I wrote a letter to the local paper setting the record straight about our silent protest.



Mike Morgan
Teacher, Lithgow High School, NSW

Participating in the marginal seats campaign in Macquarie, NSW

There is a history in Australia of working conditions improving over time: this new Work Choices legislation is a step backwards. As teachers I think we have a duty of care towards the students that we're dealing with. I believe I should be trying to do things to make their life better.

As teachers we're trying to build intelligent, social people so I also feel it's my responsibility to set an example and 'walk the talk'. ●