

ACTIVELY campaigning for job security

The National TAFE Council AGM in Fremantle in January resolved to make organising and recruiting around the issue of job security a major focus of activity throughout 2005 and beyond, reports **PAT FORWARD.**

Across the Australian workforce the percentage of hourly paid casual workers has doubled in the last twenty years, with 20 per cent of the Australian workforce hourly paid and a further 20 per cent employed as 'contractors'. (Buchanan 2004) In TAFE and VET the level of casual employment has increased at a much greater rate.

Ten years ago, casual employment was less than 10 per cent of the TAFE workforce. The situation now is dramatically different. Nationally, the dominant mode of employment is casual or hourly paid. In one state, the rate of casual employment is almost 80 per cent. In several others, the figure is as high as 50 per cent. Casual employment in TAFE is significantly higher than any other sector of education within our union, and significantly greater than the Australian workforce as a whole. (It may be at comparable levels in universities).

The high number of casually employed teachers combines with the so-called aging of the TAFE teaching workforce to produce a dangerous mix for the VET sector. In 1996, 48 per cent of VET teachers were aged 45 or over; by 2001, this had increased to 61 per cent, with 16 per cent aged 55 or more. (Dickie et al, 2004) The permanent workforce in TAFE is generally older than the non-permanent workforce. Little attention has been paid until very recently to the effect that the impending loss of skills and expertise is going to have on vocational education and training. Indeed, the major recruitment strategy in the last ten years has been to expand the system's reliance on 'expendable' hourly paid workers.

The causes of casualisation are remarkably simple. Casual employment is much cheaper than permanent or ongoing or contract employment, and successive years of under funding have accelerated a trend which emerged in the early 1990s. In some systems, devolution of employment responsibility to the institute, college or department level has exacerbated the problem, both because it has devolved budget responsibility to these levels, pressuring managers to make choices on budget

alone, and also because the monitoring of the level of casual employment is made much more difficult. Some employing authorities now argue that they are unable to provide statistics because they are not available. While this may be questionable, there is no doubt that devolution at all levels has worked in the interests of employers, masking the true level of the problem as it emerged.

The reconceptualisation of TAFE providers which also emerged in the late 1990s, as successive governments forced TAFEs to compete in the so-called training market for reduced government

funds, resulted in an emphasis on the budget – leanness and efficiency, at the expense of teaching and learning. In the end, the criterion for selecting an employment mode for a prospective teacher was the cost.

There is a close relationship between

casual employment and quality in the system. Casual employment has a negative impact on the teaching and learning environment, and affects the capacity of students to succeed. The burden of chronic under-funding of the system has been borne by teachers, especially casual teachers and it has been demoralising and pernicious.

While the impact of casual employment on the health of the system is of great concern to the union, it is the personal and professional impact on the individual teacher which is most distressing. While casual employment damages the quality of teaching and learning within TAFE, it robs individual teachers of a decent standard of living, including access to the employment conditions which permanent and even contract teachers experience. It segregates the workforce into two classes, encouraging division between them and resentment on both sides. At its worst, casual employment can be demeaning and humiliating, forcing teachers to work under conditions which are intolerable and robbing them of bargaining power or the capacity to negotiate. Casual employment reduces teachers' capacity to build a professional identity and a secure future.

The issue of TAFE teacher professional identity

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is critical in developing appropriate recruitment strategies for all TAFE and VET teachers, especially those who are casually employed. Because many casual VET teachers are recruited directly from industry, and because the system has invested little or nothing in their professional development, the issues of qualifications, and the tension between their identification as teachers or as industry experts has always been problematic. Some casually employed teachers identify as industry experts rather than teachers, but the union's recruitment strategies have focussed on teachers. Attempts by the union to argue for improved teaching qualifications for teachers and trainers are sometimes met with antagonism. The significant rhetorical shift in recent times towards 'trainers', 'assessors', 'practitioners' – anything but teachers – is a response in part to the attempts to undermine the identity of TAFE teachers, and justify casual employment in more fragmented roles.

‘...leanness and efficiency, at the expense of teaching and learning’.

The AEU is well positioned to play a role in working with TAFE and VET teachers, whatever their mode of employment, in maintaining and developing a professional identity. The union's role in developing a culture of critical reflection and debate around a range of issues which are essential to the work of TAFE teachers is crucial. Many of the contradictions inherent in the more recent changes in the TAFE system have at their core an almost Taylorist approach to teaching and learning, and an active attempt to diminish the work of TAFE teachers. No better example of this exists than casual employment itself. Often the union is the only voice for the TAFE teaching profession, and for the recognition of the true value of the work of TAFE teachers. This is a strength that must be built on. Many aspects of the work we routinely do around issues like flexible delivery need to be more publicly promoted to our membership.

Casual teachers are not easily accessible; they do not have access to the same communication and other structures as permanent teachers; they are only able to be physically located for the time they teach because they have no other allocated space at the institution; and they often do not have access to office and computer space. Frequently they do not have access to professional development, and they are seldom networked into the institution's activities.

As the Australian union movement faces some of the biggest challenges of its history, organising and working within the VET sector will be challenging. The work of the union is complex – where the AEU recruits teachers it is because we are identified as a socially progressive union which attends to both the professional and industrial needs of our members. We focus on lobbying around funding for public education and our activism around these issues establishes our credentials as a union worth joining. We have a very public social justice agenda in which our members take pride.

Enhancing the activist culture of our union is essential not just for

recruitment and organising amongst casuals, but amongst all TAFE teachers. Many of our Branches and Associated Bodies are developing campaigns which will apply across the whole TAFE teaching workforce, especially amongst those who teach in TAFE but are now employed as trainers or in various other categories, without the advantage of the hard won conditions that our union has gained for its members. It is no accident that John Howard wants to have union-free workplaces in vocational education and training, and it must be a key part of any strategy to protect and enhance the working conditions of all our members.

But casually employed teachers must be a key focus for the union because they have been long neglected by the system, and their presence can simply no longer be taken for granted or ignored. It is critical that the union develop, in consultation with casual members, inclusive union structures for the recruitment and organising of casual and precariously employed teachers. It is imperative that we examine our structures to see how appropriate they are for the contemporary working environment of all our members. If there are impediments to organising, activating and recruiting which we have either built into our existing structures, or failed to critically examine, then we must have the courage and honesty to address them now. We do not have the luxury of maintaining union barriers to effective strategies in these areas.

The AEU and its Branches and Associated Bodies have developed strategies for attempting to improve working conditions for casual teachers in industrial agreements, combined with mechanisms to limit the use of casuals either through industrial arrangements or directly through negotiations with employers. In 2005 the AEU will focus on a critical examination of the strategies it has used in the past to encourage activism and engagement and ultimately, recruitment of all TAFE teachers. It will also be a year where the union focuses on developing new and different strategies, because the survival of the union and the survival of the sector now depends on unionising all TAFE teachers. ❖

References

- Buchanan, J., 2004, 'Paradoxes of Significance: Australian casualisation and labour productivity', ACIRRT working paper 93.
Dickie, M et al, 2004, Enhancing the Capability of the VET Professionals project: final report, ANTA

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