



JOB & Environment

Why TAFE not “WorkChoices” is the key
to having the cake and eating it

In his keynote speech to AEU TAFE Annual Conference (January, 2007) newly elected Greens member of the NSW Upper House, JOHN KAYE asserts that we need to confront the hard issues of climate change and looks at how TAFE can play its part,

Such is the political power of the fossil fuel industry that almost any excuse to avoid reducing Australia’s greenhouse gas emissions gets a run with the major parties. The worst of these, which is much favoured by the Prime Minister, is the old shibboleth that saving the environment will cost jobs.

While this well rehearsed myth suits the purposes of the industry and the Federal government, it is actually the opposite of the truth. Making the transition from being the world’s highest per capita polluters to a sustainable, post-carbon future could, if done the right way, secure a strong economy and a jobs rich future for Australia.

Making good on the promises of a renewable energy revolution requires three immediate actions. First, Australia must honestly face its dependency on coal and set a timetable to break the addiction. Second, we need strong measures, including a carbon tax, feed-in tariffs and a renewable energy industry policy that will drive the development of a renewable energy industry in Australia. And thirdly, we need to make sure that we have a workforce that can manufacture, install, operate and maintain the new technologies. That is where investment in TAFE and collective bargaining become central to a clean energy future.

Coal accounts for 40 per cent of this nation’s in-country emissions. Australia is also the world’s largest exporter of coal, providing about 30 per cent

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of all internationally traded coal. The greenhouse gas emissions from the burning of our export coal are greater than the emissions from all sources in country. We are coal junkies.

Some time in the next decade the world will turn to Australia and tell us that they no longer want our coal and that, at the same time, we have to reduce our own emissions. A failure to plan for this event will inevitably result in massive economic disruption and widespread jobs losses. If we fail to begin the transition to a post-carbon future now, it will eventually be forced on us by a world desperate to avoid climate chaos. At that point Australia will not only lose jobs and revenue from the coal industry, but we will also be forced to import renewable energy technologies to replace coal-fired power stations. The drain on the economy will have far reaching impacts.

Allowing the coal industry to continue to expand might boost the short-term mega-profits of the coal corporations and maintain a relatively small number of jobs in a capital-intensive mining industry, but it is a recipe for economic and environmental disaster.

Starting the transition now by making conscious, collective decisions about how and where to develop a renewable energy industry would not only avoid the need for panicked reactions to forced de-carbonisation but it will enable us

to develop quality employment opportunities in manufacturing and build the foundations of an export industry.

The Greens have argued for a polluters-pay carbon tax, phased in over a five year period with mechanisms to protect low income households from rising energy costs.

This would not only force the price of coal fired electricity to reflect the damage done by greenhouse gas emissions and ensure fairer competition with renewables that do no such damage. It would also create a substantial revenue stream to fund low interest loans to start-up manufacturers, pay for feed-in tariffs that deliver a premium for energy generated from locally manufactured renewable technologies and provide just transitions funding for retraining and assistance for coal mine employees.

Renewable energy is much more labour intensive than fossil fuels. Each unit of renewable energy generated creates about four times the number of jobs. The Greens estimate that there are up to 300,000 new jobs in renewable energy if the opportunities to manufacture in Australia are fully developed and a vibrant export industry is created. There are only 22,000 jobs currently in Australia's coal industry and these are concentrated in relatively few areas.

The suggestion that coal industry workers

could not be retrained to work in renewable energy is an insult not only to miners and their ingenuity but also to the TAFE system and its ability to skill a workforce to adapt to changing times.

Placing Australia in the centre of the renewable energy boom will require not only capital investment in new manufacturing industries but also a workforce that can adapt to new technologies and innovate to produce competitive energy technologies.

This requires much more than just the sort of training that might be offered by an employer or a private provider. It requires education that translates across technologies and facilitates and encourages innovation. TAFE with its focus on education and its mission of serving society rather than private profit is the only institution that can produce these outcomes.

The chronic under-funding of TAFE, however, threatens the ability of Australians to be part of the renewable energy boom. It is not surprising that John Howard's professed concern for the job security of the coal miners does not translate to resourcing TAFE so it can facilitate jobs growth in renewable energy.

The second threat to these jobs is the destruction of collective bargaining by 'WorkChoices'. The comparative performance of the twenty two OECD nations in increasing productivity over the



World Environmental Education Congress

In July 2007, three AEU members will be travelling to Durban, South Africa to participate in the 4th World Environmental Education Congress. Britt Gow (Hawkesdale P12 College), Craig Hurley (University of Ballarat) and Bryan McMullan (Sunraysia Institute of TAFE) will represent the Victorian Branch of the AEU at this congress.

The Congress aims to extend creative opportunities for dialogue, reflection and evaluation in a growing and dynamically evolving field that is currently engaging with the outcomes of the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the implications of the UN Decade on Education for Sustainable Development.

This Decade of Education for Sustainable Development is stimulating debate about learning and change. Most significant is the reminder to re-think learning in a changing world. What role does environmental education have to play in this process?

One of the most constant features of life today is change. Globalisation and internationalisation are among processes that have created a world context of uncertainty, flux and risk. Schools, community organisations, business and governments around the world are challenged to respond to unprecedented and complex economic, political, social and environmental changes. The direction of human development is in question. Traditional forms of teaching, learning and awareness-raising are changing to incorporate new concepts and life-long learning approaches. Organisational and workplace learning is evolving and people everywhere are learning in a changing world.

In Australia, issues concerning sustainability, the environment, climate change, water etc. have become mainstream issues, receiving significant coverage in our media and state and federal parliaments. In fact, these issues are shaping as some of the key issues for our federal election later this year, and rightly so, as we now face significant challenges to becoming more sustainable in our environmental, social and economic performance.

We look forward to hearing from Britt, Craig and Bryan when they return from South Africa, when they will share what they have learned at the congress and stimulate discussion on the opportunities Australian teachers have to include environmental education themes and concepts into their programs. ❖

Gillian Robertson is the vice president TAP sector, AEU Victorian Branch and was a teacher at the Gordon Institute in Geelong.



three decades to 2003 demonstrates that collective bargaining or centralised wage fixing is essential if a nation wants to manufacture its own renewable energy and export it. This stands to reason. Cooperation between workers and a sense of engagement and commitment to the collective outcomes of the workplace, while essential to innovation, will be undermined by individualized bargaining that sets worker against worker.

John Howard's industrial reforms might suit a race to the bottom to become a low wage nation but they are entirely the wrong direction for an industry that requires innovation and an engaged workforce.

Australia has two paths ahead of it. We can continue our addiction to coal, the run down of TAFE and the destruction of rights at work. Or we can confront the hard issues of climate change, develop a world-leading workforce and make real progress on reducing our greenhouse gas emissions. ❖

John Kaye is an expert on renewable energy and is a passionate defender of public education, a campaigner for environmental protection, and a staunch opponent of privatisation.



Every year, over two million men and women lose their lives from unsafe work.*

*Source ICFU

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