

# Addressing casual employment

The majority of TAFE teachers in Australia are now casually employed. In one state more than 70% of those who work in TAFE are casually employed. In others, the figures range between 30% and 50%. A large percentage is female. They work irregular hours, often across a number of different workplaces and campuses, and they are not professionally connected to their workplace or to other teachers. They are perceived by their employers to be a cheap, dispensable and disposable workforce, undervalued and often ignored by managers. They experience hostility from some permanent teachers who believe they are undermining award conditions and creating work for those permanently employed. They do both these things, but neither is their fault.

It is critically important to understand why casual employment has become so popular amongst TAFE employers. Casual teachers are much cheaper to employ than permanent or contract teachers. In most states, the cost of a casual EFT who teaches the same number of hours is about 60% of the cost of a permanent or contract teacher. In some cases, especially in states where institutes themselves have the responsibility for employment, casual teachers breach award maxima for teaching hours. For the casual, it is because of the endless attempt to find enough work to survive. For the employer it is cheaper. Arguments from employers that they need to employ casuals in order to access their contemporary industry experience are in the large part absolute rubbish. In some states, the majority of casuals have worked in TAFE for as long as their permanently employed colleagues, and source TAFE as their major source of income. The constant need to find employment often does

not allow them the flexibility to be able to work in industry.

Those small numbers of teachers who work in TAFE as a part time addition to their full time work in industry are not a source of any great concern. They do represent the capacity to bring into the TAFE environment the recent industry experience that is so valued by teachers and students. But these people are very much in the minority.

Some employers try to portray casual employment as the designer employment of the future. They argue that the efforts of the union to reduce the number of casuals, or to improve

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their conditions, are further evidence of the union being ‘out of touch’ with the contemporary workplace. They argue that teachers want the so-called ‘flexibility’ and ‘freedom’ of being able to choose the hours they work, not attend when they are not teaching, say no to work other than teaching. When on a daily basis the union encounters the sheer misery of many casual teachers – the uncertainty, the lack of sick and annual leave, the poverty of those trying to eke out an existence – it seems ridiculous that the arguments still have to revolve around whether teachers actually prefer to be casually or permanently employed. The solution is very simple; offer casuals permanent work, and see what they choose.

Despite the ongoing attempts by the union to address the issue of casual employment, many casual TAFE teachers are openly angry and hostile towards the union. They often do not differentiate between the efforts of the employer to underpay them, and the efforts of the union to make sure they are not working too many hours.

Despite this, for every reason that it is important that teachers join the AEU, the reasons for casual teachers to join are even more urgent. Casuals are subject to some of the worst abuses of award and pay conditions. Because their bargaining power as individuals is so diminished, and because of the isolation they suffer as a result of their employment mode, many casual teachers report some extraordinary breaches of their rights.

While much of the alienation of casuals from the union derives from the mode of employment itself, in the past the union has not always welcomed casual teachers. There has been a growing realisation that the abuses of casual employment have worked to undermine the working conditions of all teachers and this has combined with a genuine concern at a very human level with the lot of casual teachers. Rarely have the principles of unionism been more alive than when it comes to casual employment, for the denial of a decent working life to casual teachers flows on to the working lives of all teachers.

Levels of union membership amongst casual teachers are precariously low, remaining only a fraction of the membership of their permanent and contract colleagues. There are superficially obvious reasons for this – for many casuals the greatest misery is the lack of secure employment, and this is frequently the hardest thing to achieve. In addition though, the