

# Women's issues are union issues

## Campaigning for women



Catherine  
Davis

The AEU National TAFE Women's Committee has identified casualisation, coupled with workplace bullying and the emergence of gender pay equity gaps in an increasingly feminised workforce, as the key campaign areas for women.

Bullying can be defined as 'to seek out and deliberately target another repeatedly in order to cause the victim distress, humiliation or to take advantage of them for the benefit of the bully'.

The AEU is concerned that bullying by/between colleagues and managers and the growing incidence of bullying from and between students leaves TAFE teachers feeling less than safe in the workplace. With irregular and night classes, the unease teachers are feeling about the incidence of bullying is concerning for the union and its members, particularly women.

Bullying can debilitate self-confidence which in turn can produce an unwillingness to discuss the behaviour, much less report it. Anecdotal evidence suggests that where employees fail to see any real assistance provided by their employer, or a failure to take bullying seriously, few measures of redress are taken up in the workplace.

The AEU is collating existing TAFE and departmental policies on bullying/harassment and grievance procedures to ascertain a best practise model and form the basis of a national AEU bullying policy. Recommendations for implementation in TAFE Australia wide will follow to hopefully boost employees' confidence that bullying CAN be

tackled effectively and that workplace safety can be achieved through union activity.

This bullying campaign is juxtaposed with that of casualisation - the ongoing challenge of addressing the limited rights of a significant, yet often non-unionised proportion of the TAFE workforce.

*'...bullying can be tackled effectively.'*

Casualisation and feminisation have their links in the undervaluing of certain skills, and of exploiting an economic opportunity to reduce costs due to a less experienced, more isolated and often less unionised workforce. Perhaps historically, there also exists the similarity of an implicit reluctance to acknowledge and defend the rights of 'new' cohorts of workers by the union movement themselves, for fear of alienating or destabilising the rights of the permanent, full-time, (male) workforce.

AEU Federal TAFE Secretary, Pat Forward warned in 2000, that 'casual employment often represents an attempt to cut costs, and create insecurity and uncertainty for those individuals forced to take such work. A casually employed workforce is a compliant workforce, unable to participate fully in society or maintain any security of income, or reasonable standard of living.'

Women teaching in TAFE now outnumber men in many institutes and colleges following the sharp increase of women in vocational

education and training over the past 20 years. As casual employment has increased alongside women's entrance into TAFE, women are significantly affected by the realities of short-term contract and casual (sessional) employment conditions. The Union is continuing to work on obtaining an accurate national picture of the degree of casualisation, but it is clearly high.

Alarming, casualisation can compound the undervaluation of jobs that have a gendered stereotype attached; i.e. teaching as a 'women's profession'. While the badge isn't attached to the TAFE teaching profession to the same degree, unions are finding evidence to suggest that pay inequity (an effect of undervaluing certain industries linked to TAFE) is present. The AEU is staunch in its aim to stamp out pay inequity in TAFE where it exists.

The growth in the number of casually employed TAFE workers, the pressures on resources and the failure in many places to address issues such as bullying are linked to the undervaluation of TAFE teachers' work and worth. These issues challenge both the future of the profession and indeed the Union.

The AEU National TAFE Women's Committee wants to highlight the challenges women in TAFE face. For more on AEU campaigns working to ensure those potentially most vulnerable in our sector are unionised and active, and a full version of this article see:

[www.aeufederal.org.au/Women/index2.html#TWC](http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Women/index2.html#TWC)

*Catherine Davis is the Federal Women's Officer.*