

CHALLENGING Casualisation

As the trade union movement gears up to fight the Howard Government's political and industrial agenda, **PAT FORWARD** argues that it is timely to highlight the way in which the casualisation of the TAFE teaching workforce will combine with impending changes to industrial relations and to the VET system to set the AEU, and indeed the system itself, the challenge of a lifetime.

On June 30, despite the fact that the Government's Skilling Australia's Workforce legislation had not passed through the Senate, the Australian National Training Authority ceased operation and its functions were effectively passed over to the Department of Education, Science and Training in Canberra.

Shared commitments and unresolved tensions

In transferring the authority and the mechanisms from a joint state/territory and Commonwealth owned company to a Commonwealth department, the Federal Government has stripped away a great deal of the good will upon which the national training system was built. It may be possible to replicate the structures of the national training system in some semi-agreed way as a result of the current discussions between officials of the states and territories and the Commonwealth. The question is whether these structures will embody the shared commitments and understandings between the stakeholders, which have held the system together for more than ten years.

In part, the answer emerges from the issues which remained unresolved during the ANTA years. What does the concept of an industry-led system for vocational education and training really mean? In truth, the contested nature of this concept and its manifestation in practice were

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part of the unresolved tensions which surrounded the system. The reality of the ANTA years for TAFE has been at best mixed. Many believe that an 'industry led' approach stripped the heart out of the TAFE system, leaving those who work within it casually or precariously employed. It is difficult in this current debate not to feel a degree of cynicism about those things we are being called upon to defend.

While the acknowledgement that skills shortages undermine economic growth has focused the spotlight on vocational education and training in an unprecedented way, the incredibly narrow focus of the debate on skills in the traditional trades has an almost 'back to the future' feel about it. This is not to say that we should not use the new-found recognition of VET to further our valid claims for appropriate funding and resources, but we should not lose sight of the legitimate criticisms which have underpinned our commitment to the system. The next period will be shaped by a series of counter initiatives from state governments which will present under the guise of attempting to seize the initiative in VET back from the Commonwealth and shape the system in an allegedly more appropriate way. Our dilemmas will be manifold — how to respond to what may be retrograde moves from the states to reorganize the system, how to seriously address those proposals which can contribute to a new and dynamic system, and then how to shape some strategic responses of our own.

THE **FUTURE** OF
THE NATIONAL
TRAINING SYSTEM
AND **VICTORIA'S**
PLACE IN IT

Australian Education Union
Victorian Branch

2005 conference

FRIDAY 4 NOVEMBER

9.30am-4.30pm
William Angliss TAFE
5th Floor, cnr King & William Sts
MELBOURNE

Registration opens
September 2005.

You must register to attend.

To register please contact
Ann Dettenberg on 9418 4891
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Note: you are entitled to apply
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The biggest threats are the continued impact of funding pressures, and the drive to constantly narrow the focus into enterprise-specific qualifications. The drive for national recognition of qualifications and training, so incredibly important for many of our union colleagues and for workers across the country, is at risk. But defence of the national system cannot be at the expense of the integrity and quality of education and training in TAFE. Apart from the changes being forced upon TAFE through the new legislation a key issue is the undermining which has occurred because of casualisation.

Casualisation and ageing: a potent mix

In TAFE ten years ago, casual employment was less than 10 per cent. There are now many more casual TAFE teachers across the country than permanently employed teachers. Very few of these teachers are AEU members. The issues around the number of hourly paid casuals combine with the so-called ageing of the TAFE teaching workforce to produce a very potent mix.

In 2001, 61 per cent of 'VET practitioners' were aged 45 or over with 16 per cent aged 55 years or more. The permanent workforce in TAFE is generally older than the non-permanent workforce.

Casualisation attacks the heart of quality in the system. It robs individual teachers of a decent standard of living, undermines teacher training and qualifications, fundamentally erodes teaching conditions and militates against the creation of a productive learning environment. Many of the hallmarks of the system have evolved through the skill and experience of a well trained and previously well resourced TAFE teaching profession. The real danger now, as a casualised workforce develops, is that much of the 'knowledge' of the system will disappear with the exiting workforce.

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 casualisation through industrial arrangements or directly through negotiations with employers.

In some states and territories, devolution of employment responsibility has exacerbated the problem, pressuring managers to make choices on

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budget alone, and making the monitoring of the level of casual employment more difficult.

Few employers have implemented strategies to deal with the impending retirement of a large section of the TAFE teaching workforce.

All these issues now threaten to collide with the juggernaut of the Federal Government's industrial relations changes and the changes wrought through the Skilling Australia's Workforce legislation. In particular, casual and contract teachers are very vulnerable to Australian Workplace Agreements. Many casual teachers could become fixed term contractors—no adjustment to their rate of pay, no additional cost to the employer, simply a commitment to employment which goes beyond the hour to hour term of engagement they currently have.

Organising and activism — the challenge of union recruitment

It is critically important that the systemic issues which have contributed to the high level of casual employment in the sector, and the difficulties in persuading casual teachers to join the union, are understood. Otherwise, we are in danger of exacerbating the problem by blaming the casuals, or blaming ourselves and our activists.

Casual teachers are not easily accessible; they

do not have access to the same communication and other structures as permanent teachers; they are only present for the time they teach; and they often do not have access to office and computer space. Frequently they do not have access to professional development, and often they are not networked into the institution's social activities.

Despite all this, many of the strategies we use for recruiting and activating generally can be readily adapted to casual teachers.

The AEU recruits teachers 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. It is worth making the point that enhancing the activist culture of our union is essential not just for recruitment and organizing amongst casuals, but amongst all TAFE teachers. 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.

Central to our capacity to activate and recruit teachers is the recognition of their professional identity. 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. The AEU and its Branches and Associated Bodies remain as often the only voice for the TAFE teaching profession. This is a strength we must build on. It is imperative that we examine our structures to see how appropriate they are for the contemporary working environment of all our members. ❖

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