

AMES

An Industrial Twilight Zone

Life in the Victorian Adult Multicultural Education Service (AMES) has much in common with TAFE, in that it is in a competitive tendering industry with a volatile client base—migrants. BOB PARR tells the story.

Teachers see themselves as just that, teachers. Their view of their work and its success and relevance is based on judgements about student rapport, engagement and improvement rather than commercial profit.

AMES administration, whilst recognising the virtues of such an approach is driven by the need for commercial viability based on quality product at competitive prices.

Does this seem familiar to TAFE workers? Of course it does, and the tension between quality teaching and learning and cost and marketing competitiveness generate most of the conflict and tension that exist in the management/teacher relationship.

The recent Victorian certified agreement for AMES reflected that environment. In negotiating satisfactory salary and working conditions outcomes the areas of greatest concern were hours of work, timing of the hours of work both across the day and across the year, the career structure for teachers outside the class room, use of contract and sessional teachers and genuine consultation.

It will not surprise TAFE workers that the employer sought to increase the number of hours of teaching over the year and they were prepared to pay a fair price for those hours. It will also not surprise TAFE teachers that for the Victorian AMES teachers this was a no-go zone even though the dollars offered were a realistic reflection of the extra work involved. AMES teachers held their ground and hours remained unchanged. Some concessions were ceded in relation to when the 820 teaching hours occurred in recognition of the year round requirement for their services.

A major concern amongst the teachers, permanent, contract and sessional, was the issue of how many hours a sessional teacher could work and what percentage of the workforce could operate as casual. This was a significant conflict point during negotiations and in the end no change

occurred in the capacity the employer could choose to use casuals. In this area, the TAFE experience was central in the AEU Victorian Branch holding its ground in the face of internal employer pressure.

'AMES teachers held their ground and hours remained unchanged.'

A significant improvement gained for Victorian AMES teachers was the guarantee that a teacher entering a fourth year of contract employment would be offered ongoing employment. Given that AMES income is derived from regular fixed term contracts gained by competitive tendering, this was a significant improvement gained without trade-offs. Still, significant differences within sessional ranks as to how much they could work in a week, and across a year, remain a divisive issue with the AMES teaching service.

The areas post-agreement that continue to cause concern among members are the implementation of the career structure, the consultation processes and the implementation of a performance review and professional development regime.

During negotiations, the employer sought a career structure that intended that a person accepting administrative responsibilities should cease being a teacher and become an administrator. Teachers believed, and in the end won the point, that even if administering, they remained teachers with a teacher's focus and conditions. Given the reluctance of the employer to accept this, it will not surprise that this remains an area of concern.

Whilst a sound consultation process similar to that of TAFE was negotiated,

actually getting it to happen, particularly in the suburban centres, is a continuing issue for AEU Victorian Branch members.

In all, the negotiating process would be seen as a success. Conditions were held, job security was improved, and reasonable pay rises were achieved. However getting real participation and ownership of the consultation processes

remains problematic and is a major priority for the second semester of 2005. ♦

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