

Howard's Agenda:



Federal Secretary **ROB DURBRIDGE** explains the threats to TAFE teachers.

Prime Minister Howard's assurance that his IR changes will not be 'radical' belies the evidence now facing all TAFE staff. The 'Skilling Australia's Workforce' (SAW) Bill will effectively put the Federal Government's hand on the controls of all TAFE colleges in key areas; employment conditions, course length and content and resource priorities. By tying 'agreement' to their IR agenda to funding, the invisible hands of the Federal Government will attempt to tie the hands of state Ministers and the management of all TAFE colleges in 2006.

Thanks to the opposition parties which had control of the Senate until 1 July, the SAW Bill is temporarily stranded in a Senate enquiry. However, that process gives us no cause to think that the Coalition agenda will not proceed. The states will be pressured to take the money. TAFE teachers may be told that 'their' AWA offers and performance pay requirements will be 'benign.' Maybe, but for how long? Similarly the Victorian Government's proposal to split TAFE into federal and state/territory components may well come to pass.

The reality is that when the SAW Bill is enacted TAFE systems will be required to 'offer' AWA employment, to introduce 'performance pay' systems, increase institution-based management and to encourage more private provision in competition with TAFE.

This comes at a time when the decline of areas of skills training for public utilities and services such as railways and telecommunications, all in the name of neo-liberal orthodoxy, is producing a skills crisis in key areas. This is not the fault of TAFE, as the urgers for 'reform' imply, but the fault of the orthodoxy itself; it does not work.

Suddenly, a traditional part of the public service has become a test-bed for neo-liberal industrial relations requirements. When combined with the forthcoming new industrial relations legislation to centralise regulation in Canberra these changes should alert and alarm us all. The new system will marginalise the independent umpire, reduce awards to basic elements, limit the scope

of certified agreements, subordinate certified agreements to individual contracts (AWAs) and limit the rights of unions to act and represent employees.

The old system had many faults but its

underlying philosophy was established a century ago: the interests of workers and employers are both legitimate but need to be regulated through a quasi-legal system of conciliation and arbitration.

The new system will see a return to the 'master and servant' philosophy of a previous age dressed up in neo-liberal economics and philosophy. Thus the right to 'choose' an individual contract replaces

'...a test for our workplace culture and our professional values.'

the Coalition has plans for TAFE



the previous criminalisation of acts of 'combination' by workers to improve their lot. Instead of being transported for that crime, or worse, in the new world the 'servant' is supposed to quietly slip back into the alienated working poor. The unions they formed will be slapped with fines and damages claims designed to destroy their capacity to represent members. Howard wants a nanny state for incompetent and venal employers.

The 1 June actions by TAFE and university staff in all capital cities and many provincial centres served as a wake-up call to the 400,000 employees in the education sector that they are not immune from the Howard Government agenda. It will affect universities, TAFE and private providers, schools, public and private, and preschools alike.

How do TAFE teachers respond?

As we always have; take a deep breath then educate, agitate and organise. It's not as if these ideas are brilliant innovations, they are just recycled versions of the old claptrap we had from Kennett, Court and Bjelke-Petersen. In New Zealand and the UK our colleagues have survived the same agenda.

TAFE teachers are already part of one of the most casualised sections of the workforce and are extremely vulnerable to 'offers' of AWAs. It is not the concept of an individual contract which is objectionable; everyone has one. It is the way in which the new system will attempt to displace or undermine the role of collective agreements. Some will sign to get a job or to keep one. But providing they join and speak to their union first, the terms

of that agreement can be handled to reduce the extent to which they undermine the collective and to enable those workers to move back to collectively-negotiated conditions over time.

With their rhetoric of 'choice' and 'flexibility' we will be assailed with the essential goodness of pursuing one's individual interests above that of our colleagues. It's a dog eat dog world...greed is good.

The unions will mount a major publicity campaign to educate the community about these changes. Union centres have combined to raise a fighting fund to provide the public with the information which the Government's Orwellian language disguises. Public opinion research shows that when unionists and non-unionists alike find out about the issues, they believe workers are justified to campaign for their rights, including to strike.

As educators and trainers we have a particular role to play. We know that many leave our profession because of workload, low pay and job insecurity. These changes will only serve to make those factors worse, and to make staffing our colleges with well-qualified people even harder. We need to communicate that to our students, employers and the wider community.

The battle will not be won overnight, but it can be won. We cannot expect that the Federal Government won't get its legis-

lation passed. But the community can be brought to understand and resist the laws as unfair, beginning with union members and non-members in our workplaces. We have to be well informed and prepared enough to deal with their effect there. The Union has a vital role to play to inform and assist members at that point.

In the end this is not just an issue for unions; it is a test of our workplace culture and our professional values. Either we stick together as colleagues and take responsibility for the quality of the education and training we provide, or we play their game and the devil take the hindmost. Overwhelmingly education unionists have always stood for the community and their profession, this time will be no different. ❖

