

Report

On the weekend prior to the 2004 Federal Election, October 2 and 3, AEU women came to Melbourne for the Federal Women's Conference. The Conference theme was "Our A(gender) : Demanding Equality" and its aim was to respond to the public backlash against the notion of gender equality; the agenda that instead enforces a competing victims mentality and purports to show that feminist gains have somehow 'robbed' men and boys of their lot in life.

As well as the general thrust of these discussions (of reclaiming the agenda in favour of addressing gendered disadvantage in the many forms it still takes) were the specific themes of:

- the ongoing challenges for working women in balancing their work and family/carer responsibilities;
- the continuing incidence of bullying and harassment that occurs across public education sectors/workplaces;
- the ongoing debates as to which aspects of gender equity in education should be dealt with (boys' education, male teacher debates, gender segregation of the education workforce, pay inequity and gender construction and identities) and how this should be done;
- women's participation in the union, diverse forms of activism, re-conceptualising the organising model and supporting women's role in unionism through the AEU Women's Activist Kit; and
- women's and girls' chances in life in the spheres of work, education and private life.

Anne Summers gave the conference keynote address and tackled the whole gamut of 'equality furbies' in Australia, as well as putting the size of challenge posed by the Howard Government's agenda against working women into a realistic perspective.

Discussing particularly startling statistics and policy analyses from her most recent book, "The End Of Equality", Summers painted the picture of Australia's current contempt for talk of women's equality and indeed the winding back of many key feminist 'gains'. Summers forcefully and poignantly delineated the case for re-activating women's consciousness and action around these issues and the role educators can have in such political change.

The Federal Women's Conference 2004 was also fortunate enough to be addressed on the Sunday by ACTU President, Ms Sharan Burrow; known feminist academic, Ms Jane Kenway; and the AEU's (SSTUWA) own TAFE organiser, Ms Ramona Mitussis.

The panellists' discussions ranged from the death of the Harvester Man, (the male, single, full-time breadwinner family model) and the need for workplaces to respond to and support modern working families; to the 6 faces of gender fundamentalism (showing how feminism's approach to gender construction in the past, has shaped the present "colonisation" of gender debates by the boys'/mens' discourse which Kenway described as "Masculinity Melancholia" - the loss of traditional work and gender roles creating the displacement and hence resentment towards feminism/ists and political correctness); and also to the huge challenge still facing our union in relation to the under-valuation of 'women's work'. This has resulted in gender pay inequity and salaries injustice just as much as has casualisation in 'feminised' industries like education, particularly in TAFE.

The Conference workshops informed delegates about these issues and also helped to formulate and plan union responses to these issues to enable us to reclaim the public discourse in favour of a gender equity perspective.

The four workshops looked at informing and empowering members as well as outlining the key role the union's branches and associated bodies can take in targeting particular Ministers, principals, union processes or our public profile in order to successfully move forward.

The following are the workshop synopses that were provided to women's conference participants, prior to the conference, which give an idea of the major thrusts of each workshop. These are followed by the conference resolutions for each workshop. A summary of the decisions and action sheet is also attached to this report.

Building Activism in the Workplace –
a practical session on how to use the AEU women's activist kit
(Alison Xamon & Roz Madsen)

Workshop Synopsis

Unions, particularly the AEU have recognised the traditional dominance of men in the culture of collective organising and bargaining – i.e. union culture. Despite the numbers of women in the AEU, and many in representative/leadership positions, the AEU realises that this union's culture still harbours inherent barriers for women's participation and activism. Through acknowledging this culture, being committed to challenge it and providing structural mechanisms to eliminate participation challenges for our membership, the AEU is making a real difference to its strength by empowering more women.

This workshop will provide the historical and statistical context for the AEU Women's Activist Kit, the impetus for women's activism and examples of how unions are attempting to change their union's culture.

Workshop presenters will trail a training package that can be later run by AEU Branches and Associated Bodies around the Women's Activist Kit, and will then ask for delegates for help in refining the package and how to FURTHER implement this campaign for women's activism in the union.

Reading Materials available on AEU Federal website:

(Summary report "Redefining Activism: Gender Perspectives in Union Participation", Ms Sui-Linn White, NSWTF Eric Pearson Study Grant recipient 2004.)

Decisions:

1. This Federal Women's Conference congratulates Catherine Davis and the Women's Officers for the great work they have done to date in developing the Women's Activist Kit. Each Branch and Associated Body is urged to, having adapted the Women's Activist Kit to suit the local context, organise an official launch of the Women's Activist Kit, and further promote the kit via Union Journals, Women's committees, email, training and other appropriate avenues.
2. To ensure that the issues raised at Federal Women's Conference are debated and discussed at AEU Federal Conference, we strongly urge Branches and Associated Bodies to fund Women Officers to attend AEU Federal Conferences.
3. Branches and Associated Bodies be requested to encourage Women's Conference delegates to nominate also as Federal Conference delegates.

{FWO NB: the FWO will provide a report from Federal Women's Conference to all female Federal Conference delegates for: information prior to conference, use at the FC women's caucus and Branch and Associated Body Women's Officers have been encouraged to arrange pre-federal conference briefings/caucus.}

4. That the AEU and Branches be encouraged to re-examine the organising model from a feminist perspective particularly in relation to:

- identification of issues for women and marginalised groups
- methods and modes of action and activism

{women's officers' NB: in re-examining the organising model, this included the role for educating members on women's issues prior to the development of logs of claims and how the 4 steps of organising can relate to gender marginalisation. Here, a third dot point could include 'special interest groups being built into the union's industrial agenda'.}

Carried

Violence and Bullying at Work

(Robin Ballantyne & Leah Mertens)

Workshop Synopsis

The incidence and reporting of bullying and violence at work, to unions, HR units and WorkCover is growing. More media attention is even being offered to this phenomenon in workplaces, and of course has always been a hot topics for students in schools but now is also being recognized regarding staff in schools and TAFE thanks to union campaigning.

Other forms of violence, even extreme cases, are unfortunately also creeping into the working lives of AEU members.

Bullying has many definitions, but is generally accepted 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'.

This workshop will contextualise violence and bullying in the workplace as it exists in AEU circles and the affects this has on the professional and safe teaching environments of female educators.

Leah and Robin will offer information on union training available, Occupational Health and Safety packages that can be of assistance to members and an understanding of a raft of implications violence and bullying can have on educators, parents, students, and colleagues, to best equip union members should they face ever such problems.

Reading Materials available on AEU Federal website:

- Bullying of Teachers - the patterns which reveal bullying (UK)
- Research Summary: Bullying Behaviours in Public Sector Work Environments
- Workplace Bullying: A Risk Management Approach, (Lyn Oaten)
- AEU ACT Branch 'Restraint and Assault' definition clarification.
- AEUACT Branch, "Violence in Schools Policy".
- Education QLD, "Not in the playground. Not in the workplace." Workplace Bullying, Harassment and Violence.
- QLD Department of Education and the Arts, "Workplace Harassment, Sexual Harassment & Violence Policy".

Decisions:

1. That Branches and Associated Bodies lobby local education employers to impress upon them their obligations to ensure that managers are equipped to promote and maintain workplaces which are respectful and free of harassment and violence.
2. That the Federal Women's Conference calls on the Federal Executive to develop an AEU campaign on workplace bullying, harassment and violence which will include:
 - definitions of such behaviour
 - an audit of AEU workplaces
 - posters and/or postcards, as well as other promotional materials
 - designated webpage (including 'wins')

Further that a Federal AEU Framework be designed to inform the development of Branch and Associated Body policies in this area. The Framework will include reference to Human Rights as part of core curriculum for all students and for all teacher education students.

3. That Branches and Associated Bodies work with Education Departments to investigate current grievance and mediation processes within their states/territories and evaluate the effectiveness of these policies. That this be done with reference to work done by the TAFE Women's Committee in this area.
4. That Branches and Associated Bodies lobby local education departments, in conjunction with unions, to hold appropriate joint government funded training courses for AEU members.
5. That the AEU, Branches and Associated Bodies conduct research into the ways in which our education institutions and education unions violate human rights, in order to inform changes to policy and practice.

Carried

Gender Equity in Education

(Catherine Davis & Siobhan Callan)

Workshop Synopsis

Gender Equity in education, for both students and education workers, has been paid much attention by the Federal Government over the past 10 years and now so too by the Opposition Leader.

While the AEU believes that there are indeed some very pertinent gender issues within these two realms, we do not believe that the current debate is a helpful one; nor is it actually discussing what is really happening in the areas that do present gender equity challenges in education.

Essentially there are three distinct, yet wrongly linked, issues being tackled within the scope of boys' education performance and the proposed changes to the Sex Discrimination Act:

- The male (and overall) teacher shortage,
- the literacy rates of some boys and
- absent fathers/ single parent families.

This workshop will pull apart such debates to equip delegates with a greater and better researched understanding of the state of play in education. It will assess where these debates, public and union/professional need to move to in order to begin addressing gender equity problems where they do exist.

In this sense this workshop will be as much about beating the backlash, as it is campaigning to solve the professional issues members have around students from disadvantaged backgrounds, industrial concerns over teacher recruitment and boarder equity issues.

Reading Materials available on AEU Federal website:

- AEU Recommended Resources – Boys’ Education
- AEU Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Sex Discrimination Act (Teaching Profession) Amendment
- The Australian Educator – series of articles on gender in schools
- The Age: April 2, 2004 “Here is the real masculinity crisis” By Senator Brian Greig
<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/04/01/1080544625786.html>

Decisions:

1. That Branches and Associated Bodies, continue to develop “Gender Equity” strategies, and ensure the following are considered:
 - key elements of the gender debates
 - the effect of “feminised workplaces” on pay and conditions
 - key elements of the construction of gender
 - basic principles of human rights and social justice
 - realities as to the division of unpaid domestic/family labour responsibilities
 - an examination of violence / bullying/sexual harassment as a consequence of stereotyping and enforcement of compliance.
2. That Branches and Associated Bodies also consider the following as suggested activities for campaigning around gender equity:

[An extensive list of suggestions can be found as a second attachment to this report.]

Carried

Work and Family/Life Balance

(Barb Jennings & Tahnya Donaghy)

Workshop Synopsis

This Federal Election, the ‘family vote’ is crucial. Both major parties have attempted to show that they understand and can help alleviate the financial and relational pressures that can be placed on working families.

At the same time, the hearings have finally begun in the AIRC, for the ACTU’s Work and Family Test Case that aims to lift the minimum award provisions for parents in a variety of lower paid industries, as well as to introduce the first set of ‘rights’ for casual workers.

This workshop will focus on what processes, aims and results AEU Branches and Associated Bodies have in the area of family responsibilities in many stages of our members’ life times.

Many gains have been achieved recently, but also many more challenges are presented. The workshop will aim to look at results and look at what other strategies we might need to add in like what to put in Logs of Claims, how to run professional development on the issue with the AEU principals, updating respective Department's Flexible Work Options materials, and getting prominent acknowledgments of the importance of such flexibilities.

This will help build on national and local aims and how to move forward as union leaders in family friendly provisions.

Reading Materials available on AEU Federal website:

- Women's Electoral Lobby submission to the ACTU Work & Family Test Case - AEU SA Report - Work-Life Balance Project.
- "Flexible Work Handbook : Achieving work-life balance, " VIC Department of Education and Training.
<http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/hrweb/diversity/balance.htm>
- "Work, Family and Life : Finding the Balance", A Guide for Employees and Managers of the Queensland Public Service.
<http://www.psier.qld.gov.au/toolkit/worklife/docs/worklife.pdf>

Decisions:

1. AEU Branches and Associated Bodies are encouraged to work together to develop a model worksite Flexible Work Options Policy for distribution to AEU workplace representatives for discussion at the workplace, with a view to developing a local implementation strategy.
2. AEU needs to make Work Life Balance (WLB) a key industrial issue by ensuring it continues to be on the agenda for the Industrial Officers' meeting and Federal Conference and that WLB issues are considered a priority in enterprise bargaining negotiations.
3. AEU collects and demonstrates "best practice" Flexible Work Options/WLB examples and clauses which are to be used in the next Branch and Associated Body rounds of enterprise bargaining.
4. The AEU values and respects all work and family lifestyles. We recognise that flexible means that there is not one solution to achieve a work/life balance.

Carried

One other motion was carried at the Federal Women's Conference that came from the floor of conference, which took the opportunity of reaffirming the AEU's commitment to its policy on public education, on the weekend prior to the Federal Election.

Decision:

This 2004 AEU Federal Women's Conference reaffirms AEU policy in support of universal, free and public education.

Any policy which fails to make a qualitative distinction between universal, free, secular public education and private schools which are inherently exclusive and discriminatory must be rejected.

This Conference expresses its vehement opposition to any policy which raises the possibility of the integration of Catholic schools into the Public Education system or indeed the sharing of resources, facilities and staff. Any such policy would create divisions.

AEU Women's Conference reaffirms a real commitment to a Public Education system which is free, secular and compulsory.

Carried

Presenters'/panellists' papers or supporting research is, as far as possible, available on the AEU federal website, as is this report and workshop papers. This is for the purpose of disseminating the information from Federal Women's Conference to others in AEU Branches and Associated Bodies. <http://www.aeufederal.org.au/index2.html#FWC2004>

It's worth pointing out that this report is in itself a result of the Federal Women's Conference discussions on how to better highlight women's issues throughout our union. The aim was to facilitate multiple ways of spreading the knowledge gained by increasingly growing numbers of participants to the FWC, and who also are often newer activists to the union. Thus FWC is an excellent union training opportunity. Delegates also acknowledged the need for information to be provided to Federal Conference workshop discussions by more experienced female delegates.

This year, as backlash was a central theme, the overlap between issues prioritised by the general division for the conference and that of the TAFE Women's Committee's areas for action, was significant. The TAFE women met prior to the Federal Women's Conference and were then funded by their Branches and Associated Bodies to stay on for the Federal Women's Conference, (some as delegates and some as observers, depending on branch election processes).

Both the TAFE Women's Committee and the Women's Officers' also met with each other prior to this year's Federal Women's Conference and, importantly, had the opportunity to discuss their activities and priorities for 2005. A greater commitment to information sharing and using existing networks was made by all and thus the directions of active women in branches and associated bodies, as a result of this year's Federal Women's Conference, have a synergy that can only be of positive benefit to the union.

The decisions of the TAFE Women, placed three key areas for campaigning firmly in the minds of delegates to Federal Women's Conference throughout all the workshops. They were organising and recruiting around the issues of empowering TAFE women; bullying; casualisation; gender pay equity/pay parity and TAFE's equity and community development role; Bullying policy formulation; and including gender components within the Federal TAFE campaign around casualisation next year.

The Federal Women's Conference 2004 successfully set up a framework for female union members to move forward in key areas despite the hostility of the Federal Government, some of the media and, unfortunately, much of the public in Australia. However, the conference acknowledged that, as educators, the predominant imperative for us in shifting negative perceptions of causes like gender equality, public education and unionism, is education/information dissemination.

Much of the FWC spent time doing just that - talking and unravelling the complexities of many current gender debates. However this talking needs to continue at Federal Conference and TAFE AGM, at branch executives, in public comment, in newspaper opinion pieces, in union journals and in union training. Delegates from FWC 2004 ask that the discussions from that conference be continued through the deliberations at Federal Conference in Perth and beyond.

As part of this ongoing discussion, the Federal President, Pat Byrne launched the AEU Women's Activist Kit which includes a range of ways for women to become involved in union activities, as well as the rationale for WHY empowering women's union involvement is crucial to the success of its campaigns. The kit is flexible and can be adapted to local specifications (i.e. contacts, legislation, training opportunities, local campaigns). It forms the basis of a drive to re-active the membership and to encourage new members to be involved - in ways in which they are able and comfortable – to build a stronger union.

Beating the backlash starts here.

Catherine Davis
AEU Federal Women's Officer