



Generation next

→ Briefly

- The inaugural Rosemary Richards Award was won by Marylouise Chapman.
- Chapman used the funding to investigate the employment situation of female TAFE teachers and help them become more involved in union activities.
- The award is named after Rosemary Richards, former ACT branch president and tireless worker for gender equality, who died last year.

An award honouring one of the AEU's most spirited and dedicated women has encouraged a new generation of TAFE teachers to continue the union's work. **Paul Somerville** reports.

A new award that aims to advance the position of women in education has led to a significant increase in union membership and activism among TAFE teachers.

The inaugural Rosemary Richards Award was won by Marylouise Chapman, providing her with the funding to investigate employment issues for women who teach at TAFE,

particularly 'sessionals'—the term used in Victoria for casuals paid by the hour.

Her project, which ran for eight weeks from August to September this year, sought to locate the TAFE departments where most women work, research their employment conditions and then encourage them to join or become more active in the union. It was conducted during what is an uncertain time for TAFE colleges, which face funding cuts, ►



► burgeoning casualisation, pressures to adopt a user-pays approach and increased competition from private providers.

Chapman, who teaches hospitality and business management at the William Angliss Institute in Victoria, says that, while a lot of anecdotal information existed about the working situation of TAFE teachers, a more scientific approach was required.

“My research backed up the anecdotal wisdom that suggested that more women are sessional teachers, and that the disadvantages faced by sessional workers are more adverse for women,” she says.

Precarious position

Women are often in a more precarious position because casual TAFE teaching tends to be their main source of income, whereas men often combine it with other work. “I heard some horrible

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stories,” says Chapman. “Some single women had to go on the dole during the school holidays just to be able to support their kids.”

But, despite the risks they face, sessional workers are often the hardest to involve in union activities. This is partly because they work fewer hours and at irregular times. But they also

In memory of Rosemary Richards

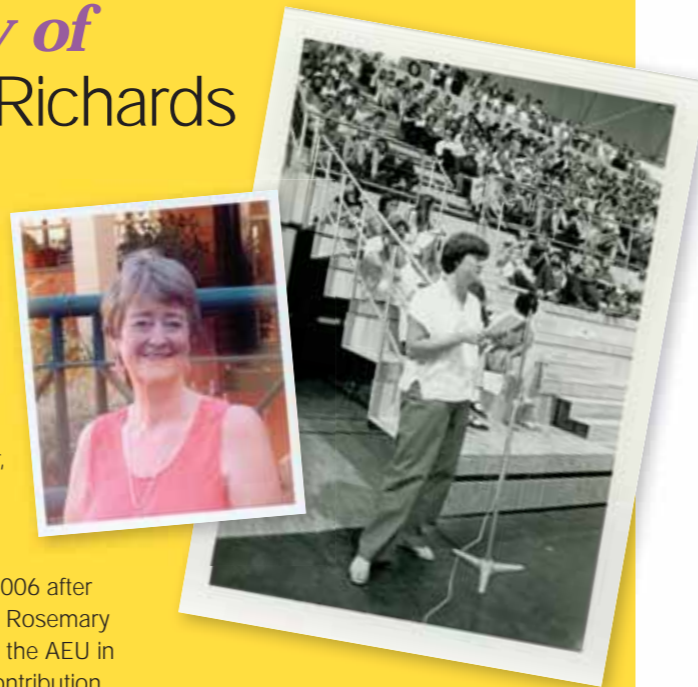
Rosemary Richards began her career as a primary teacher in the 1970s, was president of the ACT branch of the AEU from 1990 to 95 and was the ACT branch representative on Federal Executive. A widely respected feminist, unionist and educator, she was vital in shaping the AEU as an organisation that reflects feminist principles.

Richards died in November 2006 after a long journey with illness. The Rosemary Richards Award was set up by the AEU in recognition of the significant contribution that she made to the organisation and its members, women in particular.

Joan Corbett, a long-time AEU colleague of Richards, remembers her as a brave leader with a strong commitment to fighting sexism and racism. “She was a great believer in the role that schools can play in the struggle against those evils in our society. And she was very courageous in her leadership—for example, in her experiments with open classrooms in primary schools in the ACT.

“In the union, she was a very strong advocate for women in positions of authority and a champion of equal opportunity and promotion on merit,” Corbett adds.

John Willis, Rosemary Richards’ son, remembers his mother as a brilliant organiser and pragmatist. “She was a natural leader, who became secretary and president at a time when many men in education doubted her ability—as a



“She was a great believer in the role that schools can play in the struggle against [sexism and racism] in our society.”

woman—to take a leading role.

“Although I was a young boy when she began her time in the union, I have very clear memories of going to rallies and being dropped off at childcare at stopwork meetings. She was respected because she was able to stand up in those meetings, facing aggravated and sometimes hostile teachers, and deliver clear outcomes. She would then walk out and pick my brother and me up from childcare, smiling and energised, ready to tackle the next problem,” he says.

How to apply:

The Rosemary Richards Award will, each year, give a woman member of the AEU an opportunity to increase her skills and bolster the union’s work through research or a discrete project. All financial women members can apply for the award, which will be advertised in late March every year through the union’s websites, journals and networks.

frequently work across a number of campuses, without an office or desk and have only sporadic access to email. “Some are essentially working from the boot of their car,” Chapman says.

Further complicating the situation, sessional TAFE teachers in Victoria are not permitted by their enterprise agreement to work for more than 320 hours in a year. When that limit was reached, the idea was that a teacher could then be offered a permanent contract. But in reality they are often dismissed, or move onto another TAFE, increasing the insecurity and transience these workers face.

“The upshot is that some sessional TAFE teachers are reluctant to join the union because they don’t consider themselves to be substantive TAFE employees,”

“Some are essentially working from the boot of their car.”

says Chapman. Despite the fact that some 60 per cent of TAFE teachers are sessional, she notes that “very, very few of them” were union members when she began her project.

But her project has started to address this situation, and further work by the AEU’s Victorian branch will continue the process.

“I told all TAFE teachers that the union is interested in their circumstances and eager to find ways to help them. In particular, I told sessional teachers that the union is addressing issues like the ceiling on their hours of work. Informing people about our negotiations in that area was a

very good PR exercise—they felt someone was going to bat for them.”

Chapman adds that she has benefited enormously from the project on a personal level.

“I feel very appreciative towards all the people at TAFE and the union who were so generous with their time—and I’m very grateful to the Rosemary Richards Award. There’s no way I could have done this investigation on top of my current workload as well as the other things I have to do, such as childcare. I’m pleased that a project such as this one can be a tribute to Rosemary’s legacy.” ●

PAUL SOMERVILLE is a freelance writer.



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