



‘Stripped of the legal niceties, most of us are actually long-term part-time workers paid by class hours taught and sitting outside the benefits of the state public service act’

Being a TAFE *casual*

By John Wishart

It is Sunday night with two weeks of term to go. I am looking forward to another week of work with an interesting class of adult English learners. It has been a good term for me in which I feel I have been able to establish a rapport with the class and that the students have taken some modest steps forward in their command of the language.

But there is a dark cloud of insecurity threatening. Tomorrow we have the usual emailed announcement of “deployment” for the next term. How many hours will I get this time? Will I be working in the city or the burbs? What level will I be teaching and with whom? Student numbers have been good but there are whispers of a downturn. That would mean less hours for the casual teachers or, if you are really unlucky, no hours at all.

I have been working as a casual teacher for three years now and luckily I have had work each term for all of this time. Sometimes less than the maximum fifteen hours under the agreement, but steady work nonetheless. With one big hiccup.

At the end of Term 4 last year the deployed list emailed to us came as a big surprise. Most of the thirty or so casuals got no work due to a big drop in enrolments for the start of 2009. We left shell-shocked on the long unpaid break, wondering whether to scramble for other jobs or sweat it out hoping for better news in January.

The old timers commiserated. They counselled us against despair. “It’s happened before”, they said. “There’ll be more teachers needed by the end of January. Hang in there.” One permanent told me it had happened to her three times while she was a long term casual at TAFE. But can I afford to sit it out? It is seven weeks without pay, but if I wait and nothing turns up will all the other ESL jobs in town be gone by the time I start knocking on doors? Like a lot of the other casuals I put my skates on and secured some precarious short term, less well-paid holiday work.

As things turned out there was a revision in the enrolment figures and by early February almost all the discarded casual teachers were back working as before. After unceremoniously clearing our desks and filing cabinets and taking home all our teaching materials we were back

again. In fact the place was even busier than in Term 4.

Maybe 30% of the teachers in my workplace are in the same position as myself. We are in a federally funded fee-for-service program with a fluctuating intake of students. Casualisation has always been a feature of the Adult Migrant Education Program going back to the 1970s. We are called "hourly paid instructors" but we are really long-term casuals who at the end of each term ritualistically disappear from the TAFE email staff list only to reappear and sign new "contracts" at the beginning of the following term. Stripped of the legal niceties, most of us are actually long-term part-time workers paid by class hours taught and sitting outside the benefits of the South Australian Government's public service act.

The Howard and now the Rudd Government's drive to competitive tendering of educational services have exacerbated this insecure form of employment. In the three years I have been at TAFE we have faced the prospect of losing all or most of our work should we

be unsuccessful in our bid against rival private providers. We know we deliver an excellent service based on student needs but we also know we get paid more than the employees of our rival bidders.

What is the impact of this system at the workplace level? It certainly does give management a lot of flexibility and power over the workforce. Most casuals do not like to complain too much about where and when they work. People are kept on their toes, not an entirely bad thing, but at times it is anxiety inducing.

And what of cohesion? The workforce is generally cohesive, but the glaring disparities in employment security and entitlements are uncomfortable and sometimes jarring. For example, when the end of term approaches the permanents and contract workers begin to talk excitedly about the holiday break. The rest of us know this means two or four or six weeks without pay. In our three-tier workforce, all teachers have the same responsibilities and duties in the classroom but they work under different conditions and rates of pay. Historically,

there has been a glacial movement from casual to contract to permanent status. It is a career path, but a slow and uncertain one.

Could we improve the system? Probably, but it is hard to see this happening in the short term under a competitive tendering regime administered by governments with no appetite to enhance the proportion of their public sector workforce enjoying permanent status. What is more, change would require a greater emphasis from the union on recruiting and organising casual teachers and working to improve their conditions. One thing is for sure, improvements in conditions for casuals will not happen until most of the casual employees join the union. We cannot expect others to help us if we are not part of the effort. ❖

John Wishart works for TAFE SA in the English Language Service, teaching adult migrants and refugees to Australia.



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