

## 8. Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Education

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the First Nations peoples of Australia, and as such, have a distinct and inalienable set of rights. The right to education is one of these.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are living cultures. Despite hundreds of years of systemic oppression, colonisation and racism, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to maintain a connection to their lands and surrounding waters.

The AEU acknowledges that the education system has played a crucial role in the oppression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, through the denial of opportunities, the reinforcement of racial stereotypes, the lowering of expectations and quality, the exclusion of participation, and the reinforcement of cultural and political values which are ultimately alien to the original inhabitants of this land. The AEU is committed to rectifying this situation, and encourages educators and union members to embrace campaign activities to achieve this end.

### **The AEU Indigenous Activism Strategy and ATSIEC program of action**

The AEU and its Branches and Associated Bodies have various structures to organize with and seek representations from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members. The Federal Office employs a full time Aboriginal Education Officer (currently Ms Darcel Moyle) and convenes a Federal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Committee.

The ATSIEC is made up of two Indigenous representatives from each State and Territory, one representing General Division members and one representing TAFE members. The Committee advises the AEU about Aboriginal Education issues. Since its formation in 1990, this national body has been involved in AEU campaigning, community consultation, research and lobbying in a broad range of areas of concern to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, education workers, students and communities.

In 2003 the AEU Indigenous Activism Strategy was devised with the ATSIEC as a practical document to help union activists acknowledge past problems and set about fixing them. It has 3 key objectives:

- *to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members in our Union;*
- *to actively engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across all levels of our Union;*
- *to improve understanding of all Australian Education Union members about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues, specifically as they relate to education, but also as they relate to general society.*

The Strategy covers a series of issues – tackling racism, encouraging tolerance and acceptance, appreciating cultural difference, including Indigenous elements in general curricula, and measures to improve Indigenous retention rates and encourage Aboriginal students to pursue further education.

### **Pre-service teacher education programs**

Figures show that although 4.5% of students are Indigenous, only 0.8% of all public school teachers are Indigenous and just 3.7% of teachers have received any in-service training on Indigenous studies.

Recent data collated by the Commonwealth Grants Commission in 2001 has revealed that it is highly unlikely that any teacher will not teach at least one Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander student throughout their career, as more than 60% of Government primary schools, and more than 80% of Government secondary schools have Indigenous students enrolled.

The AEU believes that all teachers employed in the public education system in Australia should complete a comprehensive sequence of Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies as a minimum requirement for their employment.



The AEU is campaigning to ensure studies about Aboriginal peoples and cultures, and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures are developed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Such Indigenous studies should include, but not be limited to, studies about:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, prior and subsequent to invasion;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teaching and learning practices;
- the development of teaching practices which meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages; and
- teaching practices which meet the needs of English as Second/Foreign Language speakers.

### **AIEWs in the classroom, in the union – racism, discrimination**

Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers (AIEWs) face no less discrimination in the classroom, and unfortunately in the union, than anywhere else in the Australian community. The AEU is strongly committed to breaking down racism, cultural stereotypes and discrimination where the union is able and also to give greater voice, empowerment and self-determination to AIEWs within union structures. The advancement and protection of AIEWs' professional working conditions is a priority of the union and must remain so.

The AEU understands that AIEWs (in partnership with other education workers), can significantly contribute to the process of Reconciliation by ensuring that all students are able to develop a respect and understanding for the unique cultures of Australia's Indigenous peoples, especially when education departments/governments ensure they are fully equipped to meet the needs of Indigenous students.

### **CDEP**

The Community Development and Employment Projects (CDEP) program involves approximately 32,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples nationally forgoing their social security benefits to participate in CDEP activities. The AEU is increasingly concerned that public education institutions (particularly schools) are becoming reliant on CDEP as a source of funding to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in an ongoing manner.

The AEU believes that CDEP should be used as an avenue to establish initial employment and training opportunities, but in no way should be used to maintain ongoing Indigenous employment. We have become aware of instances where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are being employed as teacher-aides and support staff for as long as seven years. Where employees such as this are working on a long-term basis in a school, they should be employed as full-time officers under the appropriate awards, and receive appropriate entitlements. CDEP employees do not have access to superannuation and many other entitlements, such as leave provisions which other full-time employees receive as a right.

### **Barriers to quality education**

There are many barriers to ensuring Indigenous Australians receive the quality education that is their human right. Without being able to go into more detail within this kit, clearly there is much work and incentive for union members to find out more ways they can contribute to the advancement of the educational opportunities of Indigenous Australians. Some of the fundamentals for the attainment of quality education include access to trained Indigenous teachers in remote areas, adequate resourcing and funding (particularly in remote areas), enabling community controlled education and self-determination, appropriate levels of cultural awareness among educators, management of professional development opportunities for AIEWs (including the advancement of qualifications) and the maintenance of traditional Indigenous languages.

The AEU is working to ensure governments, teacher registration authorities and other groups have the above on their priority list in ensuring quality educational service for all Australians.



## **What Can I Do?**

### **Activism around Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Education**

AEU women can commit to the Indigenous Activism Strategy and program of action, aiming to harness the determination of individuals to achieve change – be they Indigenous or non Indigenous. Women need to remember that often effort by a few can be the key to achieving improvements for the majority... as the song goes, 'from little things, big things grow'!

Through this kit, the aim is for women to be able to support each other and establish action networks that can take on campaigns in this area and assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of the community and the union.

Just as women struggle to have their voices heard, so too do Indigenous women, both as Indigenous members of the community and union, and as Indigenous WOMEN within feminist priority debates.

