

Australian university union runs limited “wage theft” campaign

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Having allowed—by its own estimates—the destruction of up to 90,000 university jobs across Australia since March, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is conducting an online campaign to supposedly halt “wage theft.”

According to the union, up to a quarter of the country’s universities are suspected of underpaying wages, superannuation, leave entitlements and penalty rates for casual staff, sometimes dating back more than a decade.

That is, casuals are being paid even less than the low wages permitted by management enterprise agreements with the NTEU.

These abuses are bound up with the dramatic casualisation of the tertiary education sector as a result of gross underfunding by successive Labor and Liberal-National governments, which has all also occurred via the NTEU’s own enterprise agreements.

Several prestigious universities, such as the University of Sydney, University of New South Wales and University of Melbourne, are repaying millions of dollars to thousands of academics for underpaid wages after whistle-blowers exposed them.

The most common forms of super-exploitation include being paid at the incorrect rate or payment at a “piece rate” for student papers graded, instead of actual hours worked.

According to an Australian Broadcasting Corporation report on August 5, the faculty of arts and fine arts at the University of Melbourne allocated only three minutes for casuals to mark each student paper. Some casuals said they were encouraged to “skim” papers to comply with the piece rates for marking.

Other cases include non-payment for essential work such as attending lectures or meetings and rebranding tutorials to avoid paying the award rates. For instance, the faculty of science at the University of Melbourne renamed tutorials “practice classes” or “information sessions” so it

could pay tutors a third of the usual rate, while the engineering faculty claimed that academics could do marking during tutorials.

Those worst affected are casual or short-term contract academics, who do more than half of the teaching and research in most universities. There has been an increase in university workers employed on a casual basis to 43.8 percent in 2018, up from 40 percent in 2016. Over 20 percent are on fixed-term contracts, leaving only about 35 percent of university employees in continuing employment (Kniest, P. 2018, ‘The flood of insecure work’, *Connect*, vol. 11, no. 2, August, pp. 24-5).

At some so-called elite institutions, the situation is even worse. Almost 73 percent of employees at the University of Melbourne and Monash University are employed as either casuals or on short-term contracts.

Due to the job insecurity in the sector, many academics fear speaking out about the conditions. However, comments on the NTEU’s website indicate the level of anger and frustration.

One academic wrote: “We have the same trick at Macquarie, as is used at UWA (University of Western Australia). With the names of tutorials changed to small group teaching activities (SGTA), we can evade the minimum hourly rates set in the Enterprise Agreement.”

Another said: “At UWA, specifically the Schools of Design and the School of Engineering, tutors were paid at an ORAA (other required academic activity) rate which was unethical and unacceptable... One year, the course reader of a unit in Engineering was changed on purpose and the word ‘tutor’ was replaced by ‘facilitator’.”

Another commented: “It is common for casual staff to presume they will have to work for nothing to complete all tasks associated with their work.”

Such under-payments add to the pressures on the already poorly-paid casuals, many of whom are post-graduate students, both domestic and international. One

said:

“As a full-time PhD candidate, sessional teaching is not only expected work experience as an academic but a financial necessity. My full time scholarship amount falls below the Australian minimum wage at \$30,000 net per annum. This amount puts me in housing stress. Despite the much-needed additional income sessional teaching provides, tutoring work creates an added financial burden due to implicit and overt underpayment.”

These conditions are systemic because successive governments have transformed universities into businesses, with the help of the NTEU. The union backed the last Greens-supported Labor government as it initiated the “education revolution.” This program drove a sharp increase in the exploitation of casual academics and imposed market-style competition among universities, while slashing nearly \$3 billion from university budgets.

Under-funded universities fight each other for student numbers and seek to continually cut costs as well as increase workloads and class sizes. Compelled to seek funds elsewhere, the universities have become reliant on international students, who pay exorbitant fees.

Now that the extent of the underpayment has been exposed, the NTEU is opposed to any unified mobilisation of university workers, both permanent and casual, against these abuses and the entire offensive on jobs and conditions. Instead, it is seeking to channel the outrage into a judicial and parliamentary framework.

The union’s perspective is to initiate a class action against the universities, while supporting recommendations made by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) to a Senate inquiry, in particular to facilitate the capacity of unions to inspect wage records and increase penalties for under-payment.

The NTEU’s additional recommendations to the inquiry include that universities be required to “accurately report the actual numbers of causal staff they employ.”

NTEU national president Allison Barnes said: “Unions need far better access to records, including for former employees and non-members. And we need the right to inspect those records quickly, without having to wait 24 hours.”

Barnes’ claim is, in the first place, disingenuous. How is it possible that the union, which boasts of 28,000 members, was unaware of the exploitation and underpayment?

Secondly, such recommendations are designed to enhance the unions’ role as partners with the employers.

The reality is that universities have been corporatised

with the essential assistance of the NTEU, which has sought to subordinate university workers to the financial dictates of each individual university management.

Enterprise agreements, introduced by the Keating Labor government and the unions in the 1990s, have been used to split workers enterprise-by-enterprise, suppress industrial action and tie workers to their employers’ profit demands.

To stop the exploitation of casuals and the decimation of jobs, pay and conditions requires a unified struggle on the basis of an opposed political perspective. University workers and students need to form rank-and-file committees, totally independent of the NTEU, and link up with the struggles of educators throughout the country and internationally.

Among the demands of these committees should be that, instead of big business being bailed out with billions of dollars in subsidies and tax cuts, and billions more being handed to the military to prepare for war, resources be poured into healthcare and education funding.

That is essential to protect the population from COVID-19 and guarantee the basic social right to free, first-class education for all students, including international students, and full-time jobs for all university workers.

These demands require the transfer of society’s wealth from the financial elites. They are bound up with the fight for the complete reorganisation of society globally along socialist lines.



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