

Australian university workers speak out on the destruction of their jobs and conditions

Our reporters
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The *World Socialist Web Site* has begun interviews with university workers in Australia about the conditions they face amid the greatest job cuts in generations, imposed by the Liberal-National government and the employers, with the assistance of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) which has suppressed all opposition.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the NTEU immediately sought to help the university managements by volunteering a deal by which universities would cut wages by up to 15 percent and still inflict unprecedented job losses. That proposal was ultimately abandoned in the face of membership hostility, but the union proceeded to push through similar deals at individual universities. By its own admission, the NTEU has now helped oversee the destruction of up to 90,000 jobs this year.

Staff had been made to bear the brunt of decades of underfunding and pro-market restructuring by successive federal governments even before COVID-19 hit. The Greens-backed Gillard Labor government of 2010–13 cut \$2.7 billion in university funding. Labor also initiated the “education revolution,” forcing universities to compete for student enrolments.

For years, as a result, university managements have imposed a vast casualisation of the workforce, leading to the super-exploitation of highly vulnerable academics and professional staff. The NTEU’s enterprise agreements across the country have permitted the level of casualisation to soar to 70 percent.

These casualised workers became the first victims of the avalanche of job destruction this year, leaving them unemployed or trying to survive by taking whatever short-term jobs they could get. Because of the precarious conditions they face, the workers interviewed have asked to remain anonymous.

One lecturer in Sydney who has been a casual for 10 years, teaching on two to three campuses a semester, described the pressure on casual academics to work many hours beyond what they are paid.

“In some institutions you don’t get paid for excessive

marking because it’s set at 20 papers, etc. The system relies on you having too much pride in your work, in yourself and what you provide to your students. Even if you are told, ‘Oh you don’t need to take 20 minutes on a paper, just do it in 10,’ you can’t provide adequate feedback in that time. It’s a problem for students too and then we wonder why they can’t do certain things; it’s because they haven’t been supported properly.

“Anything that you don’t do is reflected in the student feedback you receive, which also impacts on your ability to be rehired or to become permanent. I know of someone who told students that they would not answer emails or mark a certain way because they were not getting paid for this. Students complained and the tutor got pulled up for it, which affected the tutor’s employability. I’ve had great managers and coordinators, but it’s how the system is designed, it facilitates exploitation.

“We introduce teaching and learning innovations, but it’s really about cutting costs. It’s always about money, getting more from the students in terms of paying more, paying tutors less.

“The hourly rates are not bad but sometimes you’re asked to teach things outside your expertise, which requires so much more preparation than can be reasonably expected from a tutor. A prevalent conception in academia is that you do it because you love it. I’ve stopped counting hours now because it’s just too depressing.

“You need a research output to get jobs but how can you do that if you are always teaching? If you have peer-reviewed publications to put on your CV, that’s not paid for either, but you hope to get noticed. You are constantly doing things you don’t get paid for, or not paid very much, hoping it will lead to something. How many times can your mental health tolerate being rejected for full-time or permanent work? I had to step back from research because it was too time-consuming.

“There’s an awareness among casual academics of being exploited but you don’t really have much choice because you hope it will pay off at some point in a permanent

position. Lots of people are looking for work, so if you say no, someone else will do it. Some of the contracts I've been offered stipulate that they can notify you with one hour's notice that you are no longer required. So what casual is not going to take the work when it is available? You're so busy trying to keep up, you don't even have time to look for another job!

"I do not believe that it's a meritocracy. It's political and a whole lot of other things. I don't think I'm necessarily the best teacher in the world, but I work hard and I don't smooch. I'm advised to network, etc. but I'm not interested in that. I'm concerned I'll have to move out of academia and then how will I pay bills, for food, the mortgage? I'm waiting for the decision to be made for me, where I'll have no choice. Waiting for the other shoe to drop. I feel that I'm going to be on the casual treadmill for the rest of my life.

"COVID is an excuse for the job cuts but most of the budget cuts have happened before; hours of tutorials, marking allocations, etc. The precarious nature of casual teaching is always the same, COVID or no COVID. I think definitely governments don't put enough emphasis on education, which has been the case for a long time—too much emphasis on profit. People in governments are in positions of privilege.

"I'm cynical about the role of the NTEU in protecting my rights. I joined the union when they offered free membership for three months for casuals but I still don't feel that they can do anything. As a casual, I've always thought: 'What is the union going to do for me to get a job?' I don't want to pay money for no reason, for things to not change.

"It has to come from us, from casuals refusing to do the work. That's what the unions were supposed to be doing, but they are not. A lot of my students were very supportive of free education, and concerned about the costs of their degrees. I don't think students are being consulted. Workers, whether casual or whatever, need to do something, but there's so much fear about losing jobs which keeps the system in place."

One professional staff member from Melbourne said: "I don't support the corporatisation of universities. From a policy point of view, they have to rethink it. The universities have oriented to the market and become too dependent on money from foreign students, but it has come back to bite them.

"I am going to lose my job. I'm in professional services in the faculty of business. They did not think when I was hired. They did have the money to spend to hire my services then, but not now. There was no contingency for something like COVID coming through. It is happening around the world.

"As for Labor and the Greens, I don't agree with a lot of their policies. But a lot of this, the university is doing by

itself—not understanding the right course, I believe. The government does have a role, but I believe the university made a choice."

A casual lecturer from Sydney described the impact of the job cuts. "People are desperate for work and the welfare system is dehumanising and cruel, and creates and aggravates mental health conditions, up to and including suicide. For two months I was unemployed. Now I depend on smaller and more piecemeal contracts, working at lower rates (marking instead of teaching). I face higher insecurity, stress, anxiety and precarity.

"I am personally juggling five contracts at three separate universities, with long commutes and complex logistics to minimise virus exposure. Online work is done on the internet, for which I pay, and my commute is done with masks, for which I pay. There is no institutional support other than performative vacuity like 'counselling is available.'

"It means university for the wealthy, and particularly careers in the arts and the law for the privileged classes. Students from lower-income backgrounds are being told to become workhorses for the comfortable classes—working as teachers and nurses—while private school grads will dominate the legal and cultural landscape.

"The NTEU has no record of representing casuals and feels powerless, which makes it powerless. Too many reps are middle-class white people, broadly ideologically aligned with the executive. We should take legal class actions to sue for the executive harm caused. And mass protests and marches with a clear message to rebuild social institutions like TAFE. We should demand that governments defund the police and use the money to fund mental health and public housing, and women's' and youth refuges."



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