More Australian university workers speak out on the loss of jobs and conditions

Our correspondents
7 December 2020

The *World Socialist Web Site* is interviewing 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 volunteered a "Job Protection Framework" by which universities would cut wages by up to 15 percent and still inflict unprecedented job losses. That proposal was eventually abandoned in the face of membership hostility, but the union has proceeded to push through similar deals at individual universities. By its own estimates, the NTEU has now helped oversee the destruction of up to 90,000 jobs since March.

This offensive began years before COVID-19 hit. It intensified after the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government of 2010–13 cut $2.7 billion in university funding and launched the "education revolution," forcing universities to compete for student enrolments. But the pandemic is now being exploited to accelerate the pro-market restructuring.

For years, university managements have imposed a vast casualisation of the workforce, leading to the super-exploitation of vulnerable academics and professional staff. The NTEU's enterprise agreements have permitted the level of permanent employment to drop to around 30 percent.

Suzanne, a casual academic in Sydney, said: "I am now only doing tertiary supervision for practicum teachers in secondary school… I find it very difficult to do that job adequately and not be in the classroom. This is due to COVID. It has made it very difficult for the prac students. I can see why the accountants would continue this practice, not being in the class, after the COVID crisis, to save money.

"I am paid two hours per student. That covers emails, zoom meetings, and when I used to go into schools, the in-school time. They used to pay for three hours... Often there would be one or two hours more than what you are paid for. A lot of the casual work at university is the same. You get paid for 20 minutes for a big essay but there is no way you can give them feedback within that 20 minutes. It's putting the financial above the interests of the students.

"I used to tutor in Egyptology. That dried up last year. I also used to work in the museum of ancient cultures. We would take artefacts around to the high schools and teach the students to evaluate and assess the artefacts, to boost the historical information they had. A couple of young people we trained now do that online and send packages out to the schools. All of a sudden, in 2019, I was cut out. A lot of other casual staff have been cut. I know of at least one other casual who has now gone back to high school teaching. I am in the process of doing that also, because I can't make ends meet with only the tertiary supervision."

Asked to comment on the role of the NTEU, Suzanne said: "They have gone the way of other unions. They have not represented the constituents the way they should. The NTEU said they were going to support workers, then all of a sudden we get these messages from the executive at uni saying: this is what we have discussed, and this is what we are imposing."

Suzanne added: "Unfortunately, accountants have taken over the world, and everything is run by the dollar. The American model of democracy is only for the rich, not for the poor. It's not fundamentally different here now. Australia has now given it out to business. Including education. Short of a revolution, how do we get it back?"

Martin, a casual biology laboratory supervisor, commented: "I have taught at, what is now, Western Sydney University on and off since 1989. Over that period and particularly during the past 20 years, I have seen a steady reduction in teacher student contact hours

© World Socialist Web Site

and increased class size.

"I have watched, over the past two decades, the number of [biology] laboratories reduced from 12 per semester to 5 and the maximum size of tutorials grow from 15 students to 'mini lectures' of 65 students. And simultaneously, from 1989 until now, I have seen the cost to domestic students of their education go from nil to many tens of thousands of dollars. With education quality dropping under the guise of 'streamlining,' I and other instructors have felt we were increasingly participating in a 'scam' to milk students of their and their families' savings."

A former professional staff member in Sydney, explained: "I was working since last year on a fixed-term contract for a year. Unfortunately, due to COVID, they couldn't extend my contract. We were told the university and faculty were struggling. It was a big impact for me… I've been looking for work since July.

"Applying for jobs has been a struggle in terms of the number of applications. Whether ongoing, fixed-term or casual, there are hundreds of applicants because a lot of people are unemployed… One company advertised an ongoing entry-level position and in two hours there were 115 applicants… I tried for another entry-level job in a private institution, but they said I was over-qualified."

"I feel sorry for fixed-termers and casuals being made redundant… For any large organisation, employees are just a number. I feel especially for the casuals who have been working at the university for 10 years… There's no jobs for life now."

Angela is a professional staff member on a permanent contract at a university in Sydney that recently announced voluntary redundancies while reiterating that work areas would then face a restructure. "It's meant a lot of uncertainty," she said.

"We've been told there's going to be a restructure and nobody knows what's going to happen. We are constantly seeing our numbers being reduced. We've had contract people work with us and they have not had their contracts renewed, which has caused problems for workload."

"I'm sure I'm definitely going to end up with more work than I have now. We also are worried about whether we are going to be downgraded as well as part of cost cutting, which doesn't do much for morale."

Angela commented: "What the government is doing is shocking. They're destroying universities… I don't really like this competitive structure. Can you imagine a world where everybody has the opportunity to make a contribution and without being one up on someone and without pushing someone down?"

Asked about the NTEU's "Job Protection Framework," Angela replied: "I wasn't very happy with what the union did in the first place. They went in and negotiated with management and then came back and said 'hey guys, we've done this for you.' That's what management does. I just wanted the union to listen to us and then act for us, not act like management."

Speaking more broadly, Angela commented: "I am quite concerned about the university using the impact of the virus as a way of getting rid of continuing staff all together, to turn us all into a gig economy in the university. I think capitalism is not working for the people. I think it says something about democracy as well. I actually think capitalism is throwing more and more people on scrapheap."

Tass, a University of Melbourne casual who has been tutoring university anthropology and complementary medicine classes for 11 years, spoke to the WSWS after a recent rally at which the NTEU claimed that the management had agreed to backpay the underpaid wages of several hundred casuals in the Faculty of Arts.

She said: "They [the university] must owe me so much money. I am doing a job in which you're just doing so many more hours than you are paid for. Now I can sometimes do it within the expected time, but I am a lot more experienced than most people and I am a native English speaker.

"I've been marking 2,000-word papers and you're asked to do two per hour. But it always takes longer than that. I think another reason to pay well for this casual rate is the fact that the jobs are so insecure. They're all four- to six-month contracts."

More interviews with university workers can be read here.

We urge all university workers who wish to comment on their experiences to contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE):

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

CFPE Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation/

Twitter account: *@CFPE_Australia*

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site