New Zealand: Auckland University of Technology sacks over 230 staff

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The Auckland University of Technology (AUT), in New Zealand's biggest city, has announced that over 230 jobs will be axed after a review of courses with low enrolments. About 150 full-time equivalent academic and 80 general professional staff positions will go, but counting part-timers the numbers will be much more. Administration and support roles have also been targeted.

Vice-chancellor Damon Salesa said costs had increased and international student numbers significantly reduced. There are also fewer domestic students because school leavers are choosing to work instead of study, doubtless due to the deteriorating economic climate.

Salesa told Radio NZ (RNZ): "We expect those challenges to continue into 2023 and beyond so it's not just the short-term challenge that we're facing, it's clearly in the middle term and some of these changes have been evident from before COVID." It will take years to rebuild foreign student enrolments and it is unlikely they would return to pre-COVID levels, Salesa said.

AUT has 4,354 staff and predicts a decline of at least 1,100 students. Salesa claimed AUT had "protected staff" during the COVID pandemic while other universities made cuts but would now reduce spending by $NZ21 million a year. AUT made a $12.8 million surplus last year, almost double the $6.8 million forecast.

The programmes being disestablished include Bachelor of Arts (BA) degrees in Social Sciences, Conflict Resolution, Japanese Studies, Chinese Studies and Asian Studies, English and New Media, a Language teaching minor and a certificate in Science and Technology. Under review are "non-core" activities including an early childhood centre, drone lab, and a textile design lab.

Prior to the onset of the COVID pandemic international students, who pay much higher, unsubsidised fees, were used as cash cows to prop up the universities. Foreign student numbers fell from 28,150 in 2019 to 21,510 in 2020 and to 14,440 in 2021. Income from fees fell from $579.7 million in 2019 to $348.5m last year, a decline of 40 percent. While study applications are now said to be recovering with the borders reopened, they are running at only 50 percent of pre-pandemic levels.

In August, Massey University also proposed a restructure affecting a possible 150 jobs. The cuts at Massey and AUT add to some 700 jobs lost across seven of the eight universities in late 2020. Groups representing postgraduate students said universities also slashed the hours of thousands of people with casual lecturing and tutoring roles.

Shan, a student in his third year of the AUT Creative Writing program and president of the Creative Writing Club told the WSWS that AUT has "really gone down in the humanities even though record profits were made. Much of what I loved is now going or gone."

Shan said 7 or 8 papers are discontinued or not being held this semester for the BA in Creative Writing. "In the Prose/fiction papers, the club is disillusioned with AUT. Creative writing is the backbone of many students, and it's a shame to see it being picked apart," he declared. There is now no place for a BA in Creative Writing at either AUT or Auckland University. "Many of my fellow club members are very unhappy with this trend," he said, and students are considering mounting a petition to the faculty to restore the full program.

The Tertiary Education Union (TEU) meanwhile is preparing to collaborate with the mass sackings. Speaking to RNZ, TEU national secretary Tina Smith put on a show of being "shocked and horrified by the depth of the cuts," declaring that the numbers of AUT staff involved were "really horrific."

Smith made no mention however of any industrial and political program to oppose the cuts, but simply offered futile advice to the administration. Cutting courses and students was "short-term thinking and not the right approach," she said. "Yes, it's going to be a bit of a rocky

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time—but what you do in a rocky time is you stand together, you hold tight and you say “we’re going to take the long view’,” Smith advised.

AUT branch organiser Jill Jones declared staff were “bitterly disappointed” by the cuts and the union would “do everything” it could to oppose them. However, Jones admitted that the university had already instituted a “hiring freeze,” a “voluntary” leaving scheme and a travel ban, all with no sign of any resistance from the union.

Throughout years of funding cuts and attacks on jobs and wages, the TEU has collaborated in imposing the dictates of university administrations, governments and big business. Like all the unions, its perspective has been to isolate staff between institutions, suppress industrial action and call for “consultation” over how cuts are to be carried through.

The financial crisis of 2008 ushered in a period of intense university restructuring, with widespread layoffs, soaring student fees and debt, and cuts to admissions, courses and libraries. Average salaries have not kept up with inflation since 2007-8. The University of Auckland, the country’s biggest, saw salaries decline by 17 percent in real terms. The TEU collaborated with all these attacks, calling only for staff to be “brought along with the changes.”

The agenda of successive governments has been facilitated by the influence of petty bourgeois identity politics, in which the TEU is immersed. Salesa’s appointment as vice-chancellor in November 2021 was hailed as a significant event. Of Samoan descent, Salesa was the first Pacific Island Vice Chancellor at a New Zealand university. The TEU enthusiastically tweeted in response: “What a moment! We look forward to working with you.”

The TEU has preoccupied itself with gender and racial issues. Listed at the top of the “Campaigns” section of its website is a “Gender Equity Toolkit.” This provides information and support “to build collective action towards gender equity in your workplace,” including “tips, tricks, and resources to use in your union mahi [Maori for “work”]” and links to the TEU Women’s Network.

Under conditions where the unions have, for decades, collaborated with the assault on the social conditions of working people, an upper middle class layer in the unions and academia have promoted such programs to divide the working class along gender and ethnic lines. Their role has been to boost the career and remuneration prospects of a privileged elite—including within the TEU itself. The union’s 2022 Annual Report shows that with a small base of just 10,000 members, “staff related” costs amounted to $3,151,871, pointing to a well-heeled bureaucracy.

The TEU has also declared that it is “moving towards a Te Tiriti-led union,” meaning that the union’s constitution, rules and operations are being amended to embed the Treaty of Waitangi in “everything we do.” This has nothing to do with defending the jobs, wages and class interests of its members and the wider working class.

The treaty, signed by Maori chiefs and representatives of British imperialism in 1840, has been elevated to the status of a national founding document. It has for decades been used as a mechanism to elevate a section of Maori entrepreneurs, academics and public servants into the political establishment in order to contain anti-capitalist and opposition sentiment among the impoverished Maori population.

The Labour government is currently restructuring the polytechnic system, merging 16 trades training institutions nationwide into a single entity, forecast to save $52 million per annum from 2023 and requiring the shedding of a large number of jobs.

The TEU is, however, channelling members into a corporatist “consultation” process which involves making submissions on the organisation’s proposed “operating structure.” The first “principle” in the union’s submission is to “Honour the Treaty” by creating a “M?ori partnership and equity space,” which will only benefit a privileged layer of cultural advisors and bureaucrats.

The trade unions have been transformed into organisations organically hostile to the struggles of the working class. A real fight in defence of jobs, living standards and public education itself requires the building of new organisations that workers themselves control: rank-and-file workplace committees, independent of the unions and the political establishment. We urge tertiary sector workers and students to contact the Socialist Equality Group (sep.wellington@gmail.com) to discuss this perspective.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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