Australian university workers speak out against casualisation, cuts and restructuring

Our reporters
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During the September 21 stoppage at Australia's University of Newcastle, striking workers spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), passionately voicing their opposition to years of cuts to job security and the broader pro-business destruction of higher education. Their names have been changed to protect them from possible repercussions.

Ian said: "I would estimate 40 to 60 percent of the workforce at the university are employed as casuals. You have two different kinds of casuals. On the one hand you have PhD students and Masters students who are doing extra work with their degree. Then you have casuals who are systematically exploited on a year–by–year basis.

"There are research assistants in a lot of the large laboratories who are on contracts and because of the way that grant funding works, they are typically on a year–by–year contract because the funding may run out.

"There are people at this university who have worked 10–15–20 years, who have never had a secure job, even though they have been at the uni that long doing the exact same job. I know some people who have worked here for 20 years who are still only on casual work. This is standard practice at universities. It is their business model."

Ian explained that this had "enormous implications for individuals" employed for years as casuals. "If you wanted to buy a house for example, and wanted to take out a loan, you won't be able to, because the bank looks at your accounts and they don't know if you will have a job next year."

Asked why the universities were doing this, Ian said: "I think one of the biggest problems with universities has been their over-reliance on international students to bring in income. This is to compensate for over 15 years in cuts to higher education."

On the resulting quality of teaching, Ian commented: "When you have less staff, you have more and more students in the class, so you spend less time focusing on individual students. In 2010, I had 25 students in each tutorial. It was easier for students to engage in the discussion in class, to get a broader idea of what everyone thought. Now I have 40–50 students in a tutorial, so it becomes a lot harder to assess the performance of students."

Mark had similar experiences. He said: "In our area, teaching and learning, we went from a team of six down to a team of two. We've had to bring in casuals to replace the full-time staff that they got rid of and they've hit us with like five or six projects…

"There are more cuts on the table next year. They are going to be doing more projects to try and 'streamline' courses and degrees, which will cut courses, which in turn will lead to further staff cuts.

"I know people who have been made redundant who have been on the job for 20 years, but as soon as they were made redundant, they were hired back as casuals or on a contract. Then they work their way up to a full-time position again, then they get made redundant again, the cycle continues."

In a recent email to students, the university claimed that the strike would impact their studies and education. Mark commented: "If management was so concerned about education, then it wouldn't be cutting courses and jobs. In fact [Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic)] Mark Hoffman himself said that we are 'overservicing' students."

Eric explained: "It took me eight years to get an ongoing role. It was only on contract. It was really anxiety inducing. You wouldn't know until like a week before your contract expired if you had the job again.

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Over summer breaks, you might have to wait over the whole summer period to find out if you have a job for the next semester, and you might only find out if you have another job a week out from the new semester.

"You would be debating whether you should apply for more work because you simply didn't know. Inflation is through the roof at the moment. If I lose my job, I'm not going to be able to afford to pay off my car or pay my rent."

"It drives really talented people out of the sector. Last year, we went from five faculties to three colleges. There were enormous cuts. It's a big cash cow for management. The amount of work that needs to be done, just goes up. We had lots of important professional and academic staff who were sacked last year.

"Some of those who remain are just working with not enough people to do the amount of work that they are expected to do. There's an expectation that everyone does overtime—it's an unwritten rule you could say. Everybody tries to do the best job that they can do for the students, but there are only so many hours during the day."

Rachel commented on the global decline of union membership over the past four decades. "The conservatisation of the unions is a very big problem… I think a collective unified struggle of university staff across the country would be a lot more effective than what we are doing now at this strike.

"I think there is a problem in the union where the higher-ups get significantly higher wages than regular workers. There is too much of a financial incentive for higher-level positions, so you have something of a privileged position."

Another worker said: "It is very difficult to have a sector-wide strike, not just in higher education but in all sectors. We can only have a strike that is recognised by the Fair Work Commission when we are in an enterprise bargaining period and when we have fulfilled a number of criteria that puts striking on the table as a legal option for us, otherwise we can be fined and sacked for doing so."

These laws were created by the trade unions themselves, in collaboration with the Labor Party. Enterprise bargaining is designed to subordinate workers to the demands of employers. It was first introduced in the 1990s, as part of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) Prices and Incomes Accords with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments. It was further entrenched under the Fair Work Laws introduced by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013.

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