

NZ tertiary union takes legal case over job cuts

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New Zealand's Tertiary Education Union (TEU) announced on November 24 that it will take legal action against the Auckland University of Technology (AUT), the city's second largest, over the axing of 170 staff positions.

The legal challenge in the Employment Relations Authority is an entirely bogus operation, designed to suppress any industrial action by university workers while the TEU seeks "consultation" with the university over how best to organise the sackings.

TEU organiser Jill Jones said the union's preference was "to resolve issues without legal action," but it had been left with no choice due to Vice-Chancellor Damon Salesa's refusal to "meaningfully engage with staff face to face." Jones said Salesa should withdraw the sackings and talk to the union about how to "make AUT great without breaching the collective agreement."

The union has never opposed "restructuring" and job cuts at AUT or any other tertiary institution. With the onset of the COVID pandemic in early 2020, border closures saw international student enrolments cut by more than half. By March 2021, some 700 jobs had been shed nationwide. The TEU accepted the cuts as inevitable and made no attempt to unite staff across universities and polytechnics in a national industrial campaign against the cuts.

Last September, Salesa initially announced that 230 jobs would go at AUT following a review of courses with low enrolments. About 150 full-time equivalent academic and 80 general professional staff positions were targeted, along with administration and support roles and "non-core" activities including an early childhood centre, drone lab, and a textile design lab.

While the TEU offered no resistance, AUT staff learned through an emailed message in October that the cuts would be increased to 170. Student numbers had continued to fall, government funding and fees increases

were not keeping pace with inflation, and salary costs had continued to increase, Salesa said, claiming a further hit to revenue for 2023 of about \$2.5 million. The email laid out a month-long timetable in which "voluntary" severance could be offered, before the changes would come into effect on December 1.

The TEU responded to the announcement with a token rally near the Auckland CBD. "We're disgusted and horrified," Jones told the *New Zealand Herald*, complaining that AUT had changed what it had initially announced. "We're saying that's not what they originally consulted on," she complained.

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.

Salesa made clear that the cuts did not pertain only to AUT. "The current economy, extraordinary and ongoing inflationary pressure, the consequences of the pandemic, and the challenges in attracting international students back to New Zealand are all headwinds we must face," he declared.

Massey University is planning to slash 72 non-academic jobs and substantially change other roles, while offering staff a paltry 3 percent pay rise, less than half the 7.2 percent inflation rate. Vice Chancellor Jan Thomas received an 18 percent pay increase this year, taking her salary to \$586,000. Some Massey staff meanwhile earn below the nominal "living wage" of \$23.65 an hour.

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 in different institutions, suppress industrial action and call for "consultation" over how cuts are to be

carried through.

In September, the TEU published a report showing average salaries had not kept up with inflation since 2007/8. Salaries fell in real terms by 10 percent at the University of Otago and by 17 percent at Auckland University. The period following the 2008 financial crisis saw intense restructuring, with widespread layoffs, soaring student fees and debt, and cuts to admissions, courses and libraries.

There is now a growing wave of strikes and protests by tertiary sector staff across the country and internationally. About 7,000 lecturers, researchers, tutors and non-academic staff held a half-day strike at all eight New Zealand universities on October 6. It was the first nationwide strike in 20 years, called after 87 percent of TEU members voted for national action to demand pay increases matching the soaring cost of living.

The union initially called for an 8 percent pay increase, but has since dropped that to 7.2 percent, claiming it is in line with the official inflation rate, that is, an effective pay freeze. The TEU has abandoned any unified national action and instead is staging futile isolated protests at individual institutions.

Left in the hands of TEU site branches, staff at Auckland and Waikato universities began withholding grades and working to rule, while those at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) boycotted a graduation event. At Waikato the TEU withdrew a strike notice after academic staff were initially suspended for three days with no pay for withholding marks.

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Auckland University professional (non-academic) staff held a week-long work-to rule while academic staff extended their ban on entering and releasing student marks until December 1. The university has offered a pay rise of 9 percent over two years, in effect a cut in real wages. TEU organiser Adam Craigie simply called on the university negotiators to "return to the table with an offer that delivers a fair pay rise without removal of conditions."

While keeping staff disunited and suppressing any further national action, the TEU called on the Minister of Education Chris Hipkins, to convene tripartite talks in an attempt to impose a settlement. Hipkins flatly refused, saying the government is not a party to the dispute. Labour has, however, imposed a "pay restraint" policy across the public sector, announced as a cost-saving measure during the COVID pandemic as billions of

dollars were handed out to big business.

The TEU is pushing ahead with ratification ballots at three universities: Otago, Canterbury and Wellington. TEU national secretary Sandra Grey claimed, "We have seen movement in some employer offers." In fact, while some lowest paid staff are offered 14-17 percent over two years—barely matching current inflation—other pay rises are only 2 percent, and for tutors at one university no pay increase at all.

A far-reaching betrayal is underway. Working conditions at New Zealand's universities are already dire. Staff are increasingly on short-term contracts, facing financial insecurity, soaring rents and food prices. Tutors and PhD students are paid stipends below the minimum wage while being targeted for job cuts. Throughout the COVID pandemic, academics have been forced into long hours of unpaid extra work while seeing leave and retirement entitlements clawed back.

Tertiary sector workers can place no faith in the corporatist TEU to carry through a struggle to defend jobs, wages and conditions. All the trade unions have been transformed into organisations organically hostile to the struggles of the working class.

A 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.

The offensive against university staff is part and parcel of the drive to impose the burden of the worsening crisis of capitalism on working people. To oppose such attacks requires a unified struggle of the working class based on a socialist perspective to reorganize society to meet the interests of the majority, not the profits of the wealthy few.

We urge workers and students to contact the Socialist Equality Group to discuss this perspective.



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