

This intervention critiques the Tertiary Education Union (TEU) prior to, during, and beyond the 2023 'Stop the Cuts' campaign across the tertiary education sector in Aotearoa New Zealand. The members of The Left TEU Network, represented here by the authors of this piece, suggest that the TEU have focused on maintaining good relationships with university management over the specific needs of tertiary staff, especially those on precarious contracts. The result of this 'service unionism' model has been a narrow focus on the collective bargaining process for full-time staff with little attempt made to challenge the structural conditions that are corroding the tertiary sector, and the TEU's base, from within. Against the service unionism model, The Left TEU Network seeks a transformation of what it means to be a TEU member away from mere payment of dues in return for a vague sense of insurance towards direct and democratic engagement in a political forum. The TEU left Network thus seeks a style of organisation that can build the national union movement within and across sectors in order to intervene on wider issues of politics and social justice.

Austerity, Precarity, and Tertiary Union Strategy: Notes from The Left TEU Network

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The Left TEU Network is a collective of tertiary sector workers in the Tertiary Education Union (TEU) brought together by the student-staff movement to resist the austerity-driven restructuring that decimated Aotearoa New Zealand's tertiary workforce during 2023, continuing into 2024. The network includes part-time, precarious, and full-time permanent academic and professional staff drawn mostly from the three universities where this austerity agenda has been implemented most severely: Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka|Otago University, Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa|Massey University, and Te Herenga Waka|Victoria University of Wellington.

The network aims to amplify otherwise marginalised precarious voices in strategic decision-making, and in doing so, growing union power by drawing more grassroots tertiary workers into the union. Many of our members have been centrally involved as activists and organisers within the Students Against the Cuts (SAC), Protect Otago Action Group (POAG), and TEU's Stop the Cuts campaign, the latter of which ran from April to December 2023. The following commentary has been informed by our observations and experiences over the course of this struggle, wherein the most severe limitations of the union's strategic decision-making

have come into increasingly vivid relief. The limited success of Stop the Cuts exemplifies the deficiencies of the business or service model of unionism, which is the dominant mode of unionism in New Zealand today. Here we offer a strategic intervention aimed at challenging union leadership's understanding of precarious work and democratic union action, as well as outline how to respond to rolling sectoral crises.

'Stop the Cuts'

Judged on its merits, the TEU's Stop the Cuts campaign softened the blow of resource and staffing cuts in some areas, alongside the additional \$128 million in government funding for tuition subsidies announced in June 2023. Although reported as a 'tertiary rescue package', this money was a return of a small amount of the funding that had been diverted away from tertiary education in recent years.¹ There were no stipulations that university leaders should use the money to prevent cuts to jobs and courses, and the \$128 million was seemingly absorbed by existing deficits and redundancy costs.²

The most tangible 'win' for TEU was the forestallment of some forced redundancies and programme closures at Victoria University.³ Following vigorous and sustained student and staff fightback, the number of redundancies dropped from a proposed 229 full-time equivalent positions to 140, and six courses were cut out of a pool of almost 60 programmes under review.⁴ Despite equally vigorous fightback at Massey and Otago University, the union had very limited capacity to influence management or reduce job and program cuts at these institutions.⁵ While the appetite

1 Janet Wilson, 'Tertiary Rescue Package Offers Chance for Reform', *Stuff*, 1 July, 2023; Serah Allison, 'Labour Stop Pretending and Actually Fund Tertiary Education!', *International Socialist Organisation Aotearoa*, 26 August, 2023.

2 Jonathan Boston, 'The Crisis in Tertiary Education Caused by inadequate Funding', *Newsroom*, 12 July, 2023.

3 Romany Tasker-Poland, 'Student Activism Revival', *The Socialist* 3 (2023): 4–9.

4 Tasker-Poland, 'Student Activism Revival'.

5 George Heagney, 'Massey Entering "Academic Equivalent of an Ice Age"', *Manawatu Standard*, 29 November, 2023.

for struggle was observably faltering as 2023 drew to a close, the union has reported a significant spike in membership, and Stop the Cuts provided a locus for a resurgent wave of student-staff protest action, probably the largest seen in Aotearoa New Zealand since the early 2000s.⁶

It is questionable whether this membership spike occurred because of or in spite of TEU's actions. We caution that rather than representing a meaningful increase in union buy-in, this boost in membership and student-staff solidarity is just as likely a reflection of both the immensity of the crisis as well as the degree of immiseration and desperation structurally reproduced within the modern university. This present conjuncture is just the largest and most recent crisis in a sector that has been in crisis for decades. It is the outcome of more than forty years of public divestment and the doctrinaire imposition of neoliberal management principles and market logic, forces which the TEU has been largely unable to oppose. And while the \$128 million 'rescue package' and the reduced redundancies at Victoria University were claimed as a victory for union members, the majority of activism surrounding the Stop the Cuts campaign has been driven by groups such as SAC and POAG, who have operated outside, and sometimes against, the wishes of national and local union leadership.⁷

The largest event in the campaign, TEU's 'National Day of Action' on 14 September 2023, involved a conspicuous lack of 'action', with branches holding paid union meetings nationally, inviting political representatives to sign a pledge to align expenditure per EFTS with the OECD average.⁸ The 2000 Employment Relations Act (ERA) greatly limits unions' activities during stop work meetings by classifying any rally as an 'unlawful strike'. At the September 'Day of Action', therefore, branches relied on student activists

6 Tertiary Education Union, 'Stop the Cuts!', *Tertiary Update* 27, no.7 (2023); George Heagney, 'Student Opposition Mounts to Proposed Massey University Cuts', *Manawatu Standard*, 13 October, 2023.

7 Tertiary Education Union, 'Permanent Solutions Needed after Welcome Funding Correction', Tertiary Education Union (website), 27 June, 2023; Tasker-Poland, 'Student Activism Revival', 8.

8 Tertiary Education Union, 'Day of Action Yields Political Commitments', Tertiary Education Union (website), 26 September, 2023.

to organise and lead demonstrations that focused some public attention on the plight of the sector. These meetings had the tone of staged performances rather than serious acts of resistance: no agenda of union action against the cuts was put forward and members were expected to listen passively as political parties used the event as a platform for electioneering (although, in an inspiring demonstration of solidarity, some union members chose to march with students, despite being discouraged from doing so).⁹

Throughout the campaign, TEU leadership has given the impression that it is sceptical of any direct action or mobilisation of members in a way that would seriously disrupt restructuring, seeking instead to draw out consultative processes and use the threat of legal action to delay job cuts. Although restructuring continued at Massey University in 2024, by the beginning of the academic year the union had effectively given up opposing job cuts and shifted to monitoring the redundancy process. While a spike in membership and the re-politicisation of campuses are cause for some optimism, the campaign has achieved very little when assessed on its purported aim to ‘Stop the Cuts’.

Service Unionism and Social Justice Unionism

The meek response to what appears to be the largest tertiary redundancy exercise in Aotearoa New Zealand’s history draws attention to key deficiencies in TEU organisation and strategy. These are deficiencies which, if left unaddressed, can only diminish the union’s influence over time. Like most unions in Aotearoa New Zealand, TEU has a top-down approach to strategic decision-making and an overriding focus on demonstrating value to its membership through minor short-term tactical victories—principally, incremental wage increases to be achieved through collective bargaining. A singular focus on the state-managed collective bargaining process is common across New Zealand unions and reflects their greatly restricted power following the radical labour market deregulation of the

9 Heagney, ‘Student Opposition Mounts’.

1980s and 90s.¹⁰ The service model of unionism, in which the TEU ‘seeks to increase bargaining power through greater numbers’ has dominated union strategy since its creation in 2009.¹¹ But the TEU has not achieved real wage increases in the short-term, and the overriding focus on collective wage bargaining comes at the expense of more difficult long-term strategic goals, such as rolling back structural precarity, enhancing job security, improving working conditions, opposing managerialism, and reclaiming tertiary institutions as the final bastion of research and teaching as public goods.

It is also well established that TEU has been far too slow to figure out how to represent and defend the interests of the vast number of (mostly part-time) precarious academic and professional staff.¹² Casual and fixed-term tertiary workers have not figured prominently in the Stop the Cuts campaign—their contracts are simply not renewed, and they silently disappear. Unsurprisingly, when given the chance to express themselves, these precarious workers express a high degree of scepticism and disillusionment with the union.¹³ Given the chronic underfunding of the sector as a whole—now in the grips of an anti-education, anti-Treaty, and anti-worker coalition government—deepening precarity, worsening conditions, and more job and real wage cuts will continue in the near future.

The limitations of the Stop the Cuts campaign are a reflection both of the deleterious state of the tertiary sector in Aotearoa New Zealand, as well as the repressive and anti-worker Employment Contracts Act (ECA) regime. The capacity for unions to engage in industrial action is greatly

10 Jane Kelsey, ‘Employment and Union Issues in NZ—12 Years On’, *California International Law Journal* 28, no. 2 (1997), 257.

11 Rebecca Bednarek, Stephen Blumenfeld, and Sally Riad, ‘Union-Division: On the Paradoxes of Purpose and Membership Scope in Union Mergers’, *Industrial Relations Journal* 43, no. 6 (2012), 551.

12 Aimee Simpson et al., *The Elephant in the Room: Precarious Work in New Zealand Universities* (University of Auckland, 2022), 12.

13 Leon Salter et al., ‘Exclusion and Inaction: Academic Precariat Experiences of Union Representation in Aotearoa New Zealand’, *New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations* 47, no. 1 (2022): 59–80.

limited by the ECA (1991), which prevents unions from legally mounting any industrial action (such as solidarity strikes) outside of the collective bargaining process. The ECA also led to the dismantling of the national award structure that set baseline pay and conditions, which made union membership effectively compulsory across industries. These changes have curbed unions' ability to protect the most vulnerable or influence working conditions within workplaces.¹⁴ While TEU sometimes makes references to 'social justice unionism', in practice, the union more closely resembles a 'business union' or a 'service union'.¹⁵ This practice results in a myopic focus on collective wage bargaining for full-time staff, rather than challenging the structural conditions that are corroding the sector, and the TEU's base, from within.¹⁶

A major component of the service union approach is a focus on 'relationship maintenance' between union leadership, management, and the New Zealand Labour Party. This focus produces an aversion to confrontational tactics, such as protest and strike action, in favour of negotiation with senior management, alongside lobbying the central government for increased funds. Due to the lack of consultation or even communication with members, it is unclear how the TEU formulates strategy, or even whether the union has a long-term strategy. Campaigns like Stop the Cuts are framed around short-term tactical objectives, decided on in the national office in Wellington and then disseminated in a top-down direction via the branch system. Combined with the absence of a democratic delegate structure, this process produces a generalised distrust

14 Salter et al., 'Exclusion and Inaction', 60.

15 Tertiary Education Union, 'Positive Dialogue at Rules Hui', Tertiary Education Union (website), 14 March, 2023; Gregor Gall, Adrian Wilkinson, and Richard Hurd, 'Labour Unionism and Neo-Liberalism', in *The International Handbook of Labour Unions: Responses to Neo-Liberalism* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2011), x; Lois Weiner, 'Teacher Unionism Reborn!', in *Understanding Neoliberal Rule in K-12 Schools: Educational Fronts for Local and Global Justice*, eds. Mark Abendroth and Brad Porfilio (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2015), 271; Peter Boxall and Peter Haynes, 'Strategy and Trade Union Effectiveness in a Neoliberal Environment', *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 35, no. 4 (December 1997): 567–591.

16 Salter et al., 'Exclusion and Inaction', 71.

of rank-and-file activity.

The ‘business unionism’ or ‘service unionism’ of the TEU reflects the traces of its progenitor, the Association of University Staff (AUS). Described by Micheal Belgrave as a ‘gentleman’s union’, the AUS operated in a context where university management was still primarily drawn from the academic workforce—as governance bodies like university councils had not yet been overrun by managerial and corporate interests.¹⁷ At this stage, the Labour Party still paid lip-service to the Beeby-Fraser mythos of open-access education as a right of citizenship and a core foundation of a functional social democracy. But far from representing a more gentle and decent time, there is a direct connection between the exclusionary and collaborationist ‘gentleman’s’ craft unions of the social democratic period, and the myopic service unions that have failed to defend workers’ interests against the neoliberal onslaught.¹⁸

The Fragmentation of Academic Labour

The service union approach is at best ineffective, and at worst, a structural and ideological support for the present neoliberal consensus. We use the term ‘neoliberal university’ to denote a four-decades long project of marketisation, brutally transforming tertiary education across the globe.¹⁹ Much like elsewhere in the public sector, the state has manufactured artificial tertiary education ‘markets’, with institutions run by CEO-style VCs whose

17 Michael Belgrave, *From Empire’s Servant to Global Citizen: A History of Massey University* (Palmerston North: Massey University Press, 2016), 207; Brian Roper, ‘Neoliberalism’s War on New Zealand’s Universities’, *New Zealand Sociology* 33, no. 2 (2018): 9–39; John O’Neill, ‘The Beeby-Fraser Ideal: Is It Time to Abandon It?’, *Policy Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (August 2023): 6–9

18 Ernesto Noronha and David Beale, ‘India, Neo-Liberalism and Union Responses—Unfinished Business and Protracted Struggles’, in Gall, Wilkinson, and Hurd, *Handbook of Labour Unions*, 179–184.

19 Jamie Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Heather Fraser and Nik Taylor, *Neoliberalization, Universities and The Public Intellectual: Species, Gender and Class and The Production of Knowledge* (London: Palgrave, 2016); Raewyn Connell, *The Good University: What Universities Actually Do and Why It’s Time for Radical Change* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).

KPIs are focused on returning a profit (or ‘surplus’) independent of the traditional values invested in higher education.²⁰ Today, universities are run by a new (and global) class of non-scholarly ‘grey-suited mandarins’ who, in the absence of any understanding or interest in the social value of tertiary institutions or the intrinsic nature of scholarly work, run universities as something between an oil rig and a hedge fund.²¹ Responding to long-term state divestment, all of Aotearoa New Zealand’s eight universities have adopted neoliberal management practices and market-like behaviours involving institutional and departmental competition for contestable external grants and contracts, endowment funds, university-industry partnerships, domestic and international student fees, and intellectual property and licensing agreements.²² Where institutions are unsuccessful in capturing these resources, there is no state-level recourse; they must do without—typically by a combination of rolling redundancies, ‘voluntary’ retirement, continual tuition fee increases, mass casualisation, and the winnowing of critical staff and student resources.²³

These forces have fundamentally transformed both the academy and academic labour. Scholarship, teaching, and service—the three components of the ‘traditional’ academic vocation—have been unbundled and reassembled into new configurations.²⁴ Hands-on teaching work is increasingly performed by a vast pool of precarious, part-time and highly casualised tutors, senior tutors, and postgraduate students, at a rate of remuneration far below full-time faculty and often only slightly

20 Noronha and Beale, ‘India, Neo-Liberalism and Union Responses’, 179–184.

21 John Smyth, *The Toxic University: Zombie Leadership, Academic Rock Stars and Neoliberal Ideology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 124; Neil Vallely, ‘Editorial: The Fictitious University’, *Counterfutures* 14 (2023): 10–18.

22 Chris Shore and Luke McLauchlan, ‘“Third Mission” Activities, Commercialisation and Academic Entrepreneurs’, *Social Anthropology* 20, no. 3 (2016): 267–286.

23 Roper, ‘Neoliberalism’s War on New Zealand’s Universities’, 27.

24 Janice Newson and Claire Polster, ‘Restoring the Holistic Practice of Academic Work: A Strategic Response to Precarity’, *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor* 32 (2021), 2.

above minimum wage.²⁵ Precarious workers exist as a reserve of disposable professional and academic workers employed on insecure, short-term contracts with minimal avenues for security or progression. Teaching is further ‘disassembled into its composite parts: lecturing, tutoring, marking, each with its own set of qualifications and rates of remuneration’.²⁶ By eliminating the costs usually associated with a full-time position, the costs to the employer are significantly reduced.

Commentary and research on tertiary precarity in Aotearoa New Zealand has rightly focused on the mistreatment of the most vulnerable and marginalised tier of the academic workforce. While precarity is concentrated most intensely at the bottom of institutional hierarchies, the continual financial instability consequent of over four decades of underfunding means that precarity now applies to the structural conditions of the sector as a whole. With both major political parties unwilling to address tertiary underfunding, university managers continually seek to drive down academic and professional staff labour costs to meet their bottom line, and, in the process, sacrifice both employment equity and educational and research quality.

Casualisation of the workforce has, for many years, been central to the political economy of university research rankings. Employees on employment agreements less than 12 months in length are exempt from PBRF assessment, ‘allowing university administrators to reduce the visibility of non-research staff accounting’.²⁷ At the same time, teaching is institutionalised as a low-value form of academic work independent of either scholarship or service, especially as a new elite tier of ‘superstar’ academic researchers have become entrenched, largely insulated from teaching obligations. These research stars wield significant power, and their interests are often aligned with the managerial tier.²⁸ This phenomenon

25 Leon Salter, ‘For Many NZ scholars, the Old Career Paths are Broken. Our Survey Shows the Reality for This New “Academic Precariat”’, *The Conversation*, 8 July, 2022.

26 Newson and Polster, ‘Restoring the Holistic Practice of Academic Work’, 3.

27 Salter et al., ‘Exclusion and inaction’, 60.

28 Newson and Polster, ‘Restoring the Holistic Practice of Academic Work’, 5.

puts additional pressure on the ‘middle-tier’ of full-time faculty staff who experience precarity and greatly reduced influence in decision-making, while also having to deal with the increasing demands on their time, which act as obstacles to their own career development. Research stars, in particular, rely on precarious workers to free themselves from teaching responsibilities. However, a stratum of precarious workers also serves the interests of regular full-time faculty ‘by reducing some of the extra teaching burden produced by research stars that would otherwise be borne by them, and by freeing them to take advantage of occasional teaching releases’.²⁹

Public divestment, neoliberalisation/commercialisation, and the fragmentation of academic labour circumvents the university’s statutory role as ‘critic and conscience’ by disincentivizing the numerous public good components of traditional academic labour, such as peer-review, serving on professional bodies and advisory boards, editing journals, and providing public commentary and expertise. Competitive funding systems combined with the normalisation of sector-wide financial precarity has drastically eroded academic autonomy, preventing researchers from setting their own research agendas, rendering non-commercial public-good research marginal and largely irrelevant to the research performance bibliometrics that determine career progression.³⁰ While the image of the ‘ivory tower’ still dominates the public imagination, on the ground, dwindling public funds combined with the imposition of neoliberal public sector management practices has transformed Aotearoa New Zealand’s eight universities into ‘increasingly authoritarian and coercive spaces’.³¹

The fragmentation of academic labour breeds resentment and erodes the capacity for solidarity and collective action, as each tier has interests perceived as mutually opposed.³² Precarious academic workers are less likely to join the union, both because of the relative expense of membership dues,

29 Newson and Polster, ‘Restoring the Holistic Practice of Academic Work’, 6.

30 Jane Kelsey, ‘Jane Kelsey: Protection is Needed for Truth to Out’, *UniNews*, 1 August, 2022.

31 Roper, ‘Neoliberalism’s War on New Zealand’s Universities’, 24.

32 Newson and Polster, ‘Restoring the Holistic Practice of Academic Work’, 6.

and because TEU's membership system is unsuited to those who regularly move between employment agreements and institutions. Most worryingly, the miniscule body of qualitative research suggests that precarious workers are well aware that they lack any meaningful influence over union strategy.³³

To put it bluntly, aspects of TEU strategy appear to reflect a vision of both the academy and academic labour that is not reality-based. During collective bargaining, the union seeks to represent employees' interests to management as a coherent whole. As the union knows, this 'unified voice' necessarily privileges the interests of 'the male, white, full-time, permanent contract worker'.³⁴ TEU has made significant efforts to represent groups marginalised within Aotearoa New Zealand's tertiary system, establishing networks for Pasifika, younger people (U35), the Rainbow community, and national committees for women and Māori (although, like other unions, the TEU has been resistant to supporting political struggles outside of the tertiary sector). While the union has funded research on academic precarity, it has not established any network or delegate structure to represent precarious workers. To date, national leadership's attempts to represent these workers or listen to their voices have been tentative and superficial, often adopting a liberal, moralistic emphasis on 'messaging' over industrial action. Precarious workers still remain outside the structures of formal representation, despite the fact that research funded by TEU has shown that Māori, Pasifika, younger people, and women are more likely to be locked into long-term cycles of precarious work.³⁵

Frustratingly, union officials and academics sometimes suggest making personal sacrifices, such as accepting low-pay offers, to ensure job security for casual workers. This kind of 'horse-trading' is both a betrayal of the union's supposed purpose, and an unnervingly naïve tactic for advancing job security. Precariously employed workers are far too familiar with universities' exploitative practices to accept that sacrificing wages and other

33 Salter et al., 'Exclusion and Inaction', 62.

34 A.M. Greene, 'Voice and Workforce Diversity', in *Finding a Voice at Work: New Perspectives on Employment Relations*, eds., Stewart Johnstone and Peter Ackers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 68.

35 Simpson et al., *The Elephant in the Room*, 12.

resources will result in job security, yet this argument is sometimes advanced on their behalf. While precarious workers are generally underrepresented, during times of crisis the TEU has demonstrated a tendency to actively subordinate their interests to the purported interests of full-time staff.³⁶

Student-Staff Solidarity

Despite having very good reasons for apathy and disillusionment, and in spite of their extreme vulnerability, many precarious workers have been at the forefront of the protest action surrounding Stop the Cuts. At Massey University, SAC—which includes students and precarious postgraduate student union members—organised major on-campus demonstrations, created and distributed campaign material, worked to foster community alliances, and made a sustained effort to re-politicise Massey’s student association, Te Tira Ahu Pae. Approaching the end of 2023, and after more than a decade of quietism following the Voluntary Student Membership legislation, Te Tira Ahu Pae defended staff and organised its own campus protests, going as far as to publicly call for the Vice Chancellor’s resignation.³⁷ Similarly, student and union activists within POAG and SAC were the driving force behind the largest protest actions seen at Otago and Victoria, respectively.³⁸

TEU’s aversion to protest is seemingly influenced by leadership’s belief that it can secure the best outcomes for its members by maintaining a working relationship with university management. But this relationship is easily weaponised against the union, and routinely used as a disciplinary tool. For example, throughout 2023, some of us were disturbed to hear the transparently bad-faith managerial narrative that any public attempt to resist austerity will worsen the situation of staff and students by ‘damaging the university’s reputation’. This narrative was repeated by some union officials as an argument against the union’s participation in protest action.

36 Salter et al., ‘Exclusion and Inaction’, 61.

37 Radio New Zealand, ‘Massey University Job Cuts: Protestors Demand Vice Chancellor’s Resignation’, *Radio New Zealand*, 20 October, 2023.

38 Tasker-Poland, ‘Student Activism Revival’, 9.

Such arguments create the depressing impression that these TEU officials are primarily concerned with how to repair their branch’s relationship with management ahead of the next round of collective bargaining in mid-2024, with ‘stopping the cuts’ a much lower-order priority. Generally, TEU officialdom does not appear to recognise that protest has value independent of immediate tactical gains, such as opening a space for free movement of ideas on how to reorganise academic work and tertiary unions in more equitable directions, increasing the union’s visibility, building broader community support, and overcoming the divisions between students and a fragmented tertiary workforce.³⁹

In this sense, TEU national leadership appears to be out of step with many of its own members, as indicated by the inspiring, albeit short-lived, solidarity strikes at Victoria University in 2022. During these strikes, permanent workers stood together with tutors, resulting in both the university budging on a zero-pay offer and the integration of tutors into the broader collective agreement.⁴⁰ This result was in large part driven by the tentative self-organisation of casual workers into Victoria University’s Tutor Network. The willingness of permanent workers to take strike action and stand in solidarity with precarious workers is a sign of the way forward, showing both that industrial action can work and that workers with different pay and conditions need not be pitted against each other. Both groups have a shared interest in opposing neoliberal managerialism and in fostering a more democratic and politically-engaged union.

Normalising Struggle

TEU’s partnership-based approach is not delivering outcomes even for the permanent workforce in universities. Data commissioned by the TEU from BERL found that average salaries at Otago have fallen by 10% over

39 Heather McKnight, ‘The Sussex Campus “Forever Strike”: Estrangement, Resistance and Utopian Temporality’, *Studies in Arts and Humanities* 5, no. 1 (2019): 145–172; Salter et al., ‘Exclusion and Inaction’, 62.

40 Victoria University of Wellington, ‘Victoria University of Wellington Tutors’ (and Other Research and Teaching Support Staff) Collective Agreement, 1 February, 2022–30 June, 2023.

the last 13 years, and 17% at Auckland University.⁴¹ While the union had overwhelming member support for strike action in 2022, branch leadership opted for four-hour symbolic strikes.⁴² While union members at Waikato and Auckland Universities bravely pressed ahead with marking and assessment bans, these bans were called off after employers threatened punitive pay deductions. For most tertiary workers, these symbolic strikes resulted in pay increases below the cost of living—pay cuts in real terms.

The 2022 strikes were the first in sixteen years, and the TEU does not have a strong tradition of industrial action. Here, TEU is lagging behind tertiary unions in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, where unions have responded to very similar conditions with increasingly militant industrial action aimed at ‘completely shutting down [institutions]’.⁴³ Internationally, tertiary unions have launched much more sustained publicity campaigns and militant industrial action to secure more equitable conditions of employment for these workers. Just a few examples include the ‘Equity, Security, and Dignity’ campaign launched in 2018 at Rutgers University, and the series of week-long strikes carried out by the National Tertiary Education Union at Melbourne University in late 2023, which had a strong focus on casualisation and wage-theft.⁴⁴

One of the key benefits of campaigns such as those above—which are grounded in militant demands and centred on industrial action—is

41 Tertiary Education Union, ‘Where Does the Money Go? Analysis of NZ Universities’ Financial Statements’, Tertiary Education Union Report (August 2022), 6.

42 For a more sustained critique of symbolic strikes, see Toby Boraman, ‘Politics from Below: Social Movements and Protest in the Twilight of Neoliberalism’, in *Tutira Mai: Making Change in Aotearoa New Zealand*, eds. David Belgrave and Giles Dodson (Auckland: Massey University Press, 2021), 315–332; Joe Burns, *Class Struggle Unionism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022).

43 Charlotte Muru-Lanning, ‘“Underpaid and Overworked”: The University Strikes Explained’, *The Spinoff*, 23 November, 2022; The University Worker, ‘Where next after the MAB?’, *The University Worker: A Rank and File Strike Bulletin* (4 August, 2023), 1.

44 Newson and Polster, ‘Restoring the Holistic Practice of Academic Work’, 1; Emily Hope and Abigail Fisher, ‘Melbourne University Workers are Gearing Up for a Second Week-long Strike’, interview by Joshua Barnes, *Jacobin*, 29 September, 2023.

the breaking down of the normal barriers between university identities, such as permanent/casualised staff, lecturing staff/students, and lecturing/professional staff. Divisions and hierarchies, which are routinely reinforced in universities, can be bridged on the picket line, as strikers re-orient their identities towards a more politicised collectivity in opposition to the bosses' bottom-line.⁴⁵ This collectivity has already been evidenced in Aotearoa New Zealand during the 2022 strikes and the campaigns against the cuts at Massey, Victoria, and Otago during 2023.

Crucially, SAC demonstrated that students are increasingly willing to shrug off their assigned role as passive consumers whose interests are supposedly in opposition to union-led industrial action. SAC's actions, which have been by far the most innovative and militant, made the cause, at least briefly, 'feel like a movement' reaching beyond limited claims for funding and wage increases towards a vision for a more sustainable and just alternative to the neoliberal model.⁴⁶

The dialogic effects of strikes and protests allows for new voices to be heard from the margins, including precarious, racialised, gendered, queer, and neurodivergent identities that are often excluded from decision-making in the contemporary university.⁴⁷ The ability of student associations to articulate political critiques of university management has been severely curtailed since the abolition of compulsory student services fees, with short-term funding and service arrangements used as a disciplinary mechanism to transform associations into 'yet another service delivery arm of university

45 Laurie Bauer, 'Professors-in-Training or Precarious Workers? Identity, Coalition Building, and Social Movement Unionism in the 2015 University of Toronto Graduate Employee Strike', *Labor Studies Journal* 42, no. 4 (2017): 273–294.

46 Dean Caivano and Terry Maley, 'Critical Pedagogy in the Neoliberal University: Reflections on the York University Strike through a Marcusean Lens', *New Political Science* 38, no. 4 (2016): 501–515.

47 Shiv Ganesh and Heather Zoller, 'Dialogue, Activism, and Democratic Social Change', *Communication Theory* 22, no. 1 (2012): 66–91; Connell, *The Good University*, 18.

management'.⁴⁸ But these efforts to depoliticise student life have also created the conditions in which the SAC movement was able to put forward a more trenchant and diverse student voice, acting as something resembling independent, decentralised student unions. The TEU needs to adapt so that it is more responsive and supportive of these kinds of movements, which will also aid its transition from service to social movement unionism. Doing so will allow the TEU to better reflect member interests in social justice issues outside the workplace, as well as forge stronger links with unions and activist groups outside of the tertiary sector.⁴⁹

Centrally, the TEU must find a way to effectively fight against the internal and external forces that have disassembled the academic vocation, and which produce and reproduce precarity as a feature of almost all tertiary labour. This process should include a plan to reduce (with a view to eliminating) the top-tier of the academic hierarchy—those designated as 'research-stars'—including a vision for reforming the research funding systems that disadvantage and disincentive non-commercial, social good research (the type of research that can only exist within universities). At the same time, the union should work to reunify academic labour, improving conditions for full-time staff while rolling back casualisation and precarity, and strongly opposing (and providing alternatives) to proposals to create a new and lower tier of permanent teaching-only positions.

The prospects for achieving progress in any of these areas hinges on whether the union can learn to coordinate sustained industrial action during collective bargaining to create the leverage to pressure employers to make concessions, and to force tertiary funding back onto the political agenda. The first step in developing this kind of industrial muscle is establishing a democratic delegate structure and a bottom-up approach to strategy that empowers rank-and-file members and fosters unity between different positions within the university. The union has recently made tentative efforts to increase the number of its delegates, initiating one-day

48 Richard Shaw and Matt Russell, 'Institutional Places: The University', in *Turangawaewae: Identity and Belonging in Aotearoa/NZ*, eds., Ella Kahu, Helen Dollery, and Richard Shaw (Auckland: Massey University Press, 2022), 190.

49 Caivano and Maley, 'Critical Pedagogy in the Neoliberal University'.

delegate training at the start of 2024. However, those of us who attended delegate training found it was singularly focused on encouraging volunteers to be uncritical promoters of the benefits of union membership, rather than empowered political representatives or agents of workplace struggle. Recent industrial action undertaken in the United Kingdom by the University and College Union and in Melbourne by the National Tertiary Education Union provide instructive case studies of how tertiary strike action could be tailored to Aotearoa New Zealand’s institutional and legislative context. While industrial action is illegal under the ERA outside bargaining periods, fines have been avoided in the past by organising stoppages outside of the paid leadership.⁵⁰ Given the dire circumstances facing the sector, branch leaders need to prepare militant alternatives to be discussed or refined by the membership. In the long term, the ERA regime will not be overturned without strikes and legal challenges supported by the whole union movement.

In our view, the weaknesses of the service and business union models, if left unacknowledged and unaddressed, will erode union power over the medium and long term, further alienate large sections of the tertiary workforce, and, ultimately, cede control of the tertiary sector to the bosses in non-scholarly administration. Universities do not simply reflect wider social inequalities, but they also have a central role in either challenging or reinforcing these inequalities. We need to look beyond the current crisis towards the wholesale transformation of what it means to be a TEU member. Membership should mean more than paying dues in return for a vague sense of insurance; it should mean being engaged in a political forum. The Left TEU Network seeks a style of organisation that can build the national union movement within and across sectors, and intervene on wider issues of politics and social justice. The stakes are immense: if the TEU does not find a way to shift its strategy towards empowering members to fight for the structural reform of Aotearoa New Zealand’s tertiary system, then it is complicit in the expansion and entrenchment of the neoliberal university, and the deeper decay of union power.

50 New Zealand Herald, ‘Teachers’ Wildcat Action Spreads’, *New Zealand Herald*, 24 May, 2002.