



Thanks for being good neighbours

As I write this, the tertiary education institutions in Christchurch where TEU members work are shut for the second time in less than six months. At this point, as far as we know based on sketchy information, all our members are alive and have avoided serious injury. But is likely that most will know someone who was either seriously injured or killed, and many will have lost homes, belongings and are still without water and power.

Hopefully, by the time you read this the people of Christchurch will be on the way to rebuilding their city, and opening their learning institutions.

We, as New Zealanders, spent the summer looking on in horror as similar tragedy unfolded in Queensland and Victoria – in your case floods. The plague of tragedies that have struck both New Zealand and Australia in recent months has emotionally reinforced what we already knew intellectually; that New Zealand and Australian workers are very closely connected. New Zealanders have nothing but gratitude and respect for the hundreds of police officers who dropped what they were doing in Australia to come to Christchurch and help get Canterbury up and running. Some of the first images on our TV after the earthquake were Australian doctors who happened to be attending a conference in Christchurch rushing to help injured New Zealanders.

Last year it was Australians who rushed to support us during the mining disaster at Pike River. New Zealanders will recognise all this and likely be reticent, at least in the near future, to make our usual quips and derogatory comments about Aussies.

But, for those of us in the tertiary education sector, the links are normally more prosaic. Very few academics in New Zealand have not either worked in Australia, intend to work in Australia or have a close working relationship with colleagues in an Australian university or TAFE.

Here in New Zealand we often conceptualise this as a problem. 'How do we keep our good people here on this side of the Tasman when they can get 25 per cent more pay over the ditch?' Or 'Australia is so big and economically powerful that it could overwhelm us if we

get too close.' Or 'our Vice-Chancellors and Chief Executives might start copying some of the nefarious behaviour that goes on over in Australia.'

But, if we are honest, there are also exciting opportunities. Pay is lower here, but there is no doubt that it would be lower still if tertiary education employers did not feel the pressure of higher wages that union members in Australia have negotiated. Australia is big and powerful, but for people involved in tertiary education, who like to share ideas and collaborate, it is pretty special to have all Australia's resources and people so near. And, as for the nefarious bosses, it might well be that you have the same fears about your proximity to us.

For us, at this point in time, it is also incredibly important to be able to point across the Tasman and show that, despite the current economic climate, it is possible to view tertiary education as an investment rather than a cost.

Your Government may not be doing all that you and your students need for high quality education and research, but it does seem from afar to recognise the education is a crucial tool for building a sustainable, equitable and strong economy. Our Government may say it values tertiary education, but it is cutting funding not just in real terms but in actual dollar amounts. Worse, the places it is making the biggest cuts are to those courses and providers that would give skills education and opportunities to those who would not otherwise get a chance.

Last year we counted over 50 major reviews resulting in restructuring and loss of jobs at universities, polytechnics and wānanga, and hundreds of smaller reviews and restructures. Good people are losing their jobs and good students are losing their chance to study because the Government is not funding enough places. Then the Government has the temerity to say that people should get off the benefits because there are jobs, it is just that there is a skills shortage.

No doubt you have been through this in the past and New Zealand, at that time, has looked attractive by comparison. Together we continue to support each other through, not just the tragedies over which we have no control, but also the short-sighted and short-term policies of politicians who refuse to invest in our young people's future. Because as union members we can influence those things, by working collectively on both sides of the Tasman Sea. **A**

*Sandra Grey is National President/Te Tumu Whakarae,
New Zealand Tertiary Education Union/Te Hautū Kahurangi o Aotearoa*

TEU 🌐 www.teu.ac.nz



Left: Knox Church, Christchurch, after the February earthquake.

Photo: Francis Vallance ©2011, www.flickr.com/photos/francisvallance