



Lesley Francey

Polytechnics suffer under NZ Government

Like most people in the polytechnic sector, I am proud of the contribution we staff make to New Zealand, to giving our students the opportunity to change their lives and the lives of the people in their families and communities. I am proud of the way we support NZ businesses and industries, and the way we put people into jobs or, even better, careers. And I am proud to be one small part of a public network of learning opportunities that stretches all across New Zealand.

However, as you may know, not all is well in polytechnics at present. That malaise is nowhere more evident than in employment relations within many of our polytechnics. Employment relations in the polytechnic sector have not been easy for a long time, but in recent years the situation has become toxic.

Sadly, the cause of this problem is directly traceable to the Government. The Government has made three choices in recent years that have together changed the nature of polytechnics, and therefore changed the way our employers choose to work with us.

The first decision the Government made was to systematically cut funding to polytechnics. Government funding to polytechnics fell by over NZ\$50 million between 2010 and 2011. Since then there have been further cuts that we estimate stripped about NZ\$36 million out of polytechnics. In the last two years alone eighteen polytechnics have lost about NZ\$90 million dollars of funding - roughly NZ\$5 million each.

The impacts of these cuts have been never-ending reviews and restructuring course closures, loss of opportunities for students, higher staff: student ratios, more workload and more pressure. Not only has the Government ignored the role polytechnics play helping communities through the financial crisis and the threat of unemployment. It has actively undermined our ability to help in the challenges NZ is facing.

The second decision the Government made was to actively oppose working people getting fair pay and working conditions.

In 2011, the Government made significant changes to the law, which took away working people's rights. It introduced a 90-day trial period for new workers, it limited union access to work-sites, it allowed employers to cut across bargaining and talk directly with employees during bargaining rather than going through union representatives, and it made it easier for bosses to dismiss workers and reject claims for sick leave.

The Government now has a further suite of changes to employment law that it intends to introduce this year. These changes will reduce union members' ability to negotiate Collective Agreements by making it easier for employers to walk away from negotiations and harder for workers to take industrial action. The Government also wants to remove protections for new employees (employers will now be able to offer worse terms and conditions than the Collective Agreement).

Furthermore, the State Services Commission prevents pay-rises based on market relativity and/or cost of living adjustment, and does not allow pay settlements that lead to wider labour market movements and trends. Often the only way to get a pay-rise is to prove an increase in productivity, and that usually means a cut in other working conditions - e.g. longer hours or the loss of leave.

The latest data shows public sector workers involved in education and training averaged pay rises of only one-tenth of a per cent during the last three months of 2012. The Government, through the State Services Commission, is strangling pay-rises in public education.

Education professionals receive the lowest average pay rise of any occupation group last year - just 0.8 per cent. The Govern-

ment needs to own up to its cost-cutting actions, which are making it harder, day-by-day, for education professionals to look after their families and pay their mortgages.

TEU has struggled for several years now to conclude Collective Agreements, especially within the polytechnic sector because the State Services Commission actively opposes working people getting a fair pay rise to reflect the good work they are doing and the money they need to support their families. As a result, workers' wages and salaries are 2.5 per cent behind where they were in March 2009.

The third decision this Government made was less obvious and less discussed at the time but equally as insidious. In 2009 parliament passed a law that gutted staff, student and community representation on polytechnic Councils, instead giving the Minister the right to appoint half the Council and for those ministerial appointees to appoint the remainder of the Council. And just to be safe, it gave the Minister's own appointees an absolute voting majority and the casting vote on any decision to the ministerially-appointed Council Chairperson.

This annexation of local involvement and democracy within community polytechnics not only silenced Councils from speaking out or standing up for their staff and students in the face of government attacks, it also created a climate of fear for others working in the sector. Polytechnic Chief Executives had until late last year been noticeably quiet about the huge funding cuts and inordinate expectations to perform being placed on them by the Government.

These three factors - slashed Government funding, new rules that suppress wages and conditions, and the loss of local democracy and ability to have a real say in our own governance and destiny - have taken communities that should be great places to work (and often still are) and created a hostile environment where workers are treated as costs to be cut rather than assets to be treasured. ♠

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