



Lesley Francey

## Kiwi tertiary staff working in fear

Underfunding. Reviews. Restructures. Redundancies. It's a familiar pattern, and one you'll be experiencing more and more with the first Abbott budget set to take the knife to tertiary education in Australia after years of luke-warm support from Labor. Across the ditch, here in New Zealand, a similar cycle of cutbacks continues to count its victims and near-victims. During March and April alone our union dealt with 59 reviews and restructures, across 16 different tertiary institutions, affecting over 350 employees.

And what is the impact of a sector treading water? Of all those reviews and savings targets? It is the staff that cop it and dread it.

Our recent 'State of the Sector' survey reveals that three out of five tertiary education workers believe that their job will be restructured within the next two years, and 30% believe they will be made redundant.

Many commentators in the media still think of the tertiary education sector as being filled with secure, plum jobs with degrees of autonomy.

In 2014, the reality could not be more different; 43% of staff feel that there has been an erosion in their working conditions while a majority have seen deterioration in the recognition of their contribution. In reality, its reviews, restructures and redundancies which reign.

### Commercialisation and job insecurity

The squeeze in our universities and polytechnics has been so marked that countless staff are living under a cloud of job insecurity. They fear for themselves and their families. With mortgages, rent and ever-increasing bills to meet, our members need certainty again. But our governments in Canberra and Wellington aren't listening; in fact they're driving the squeeze for their own purposes.

Your Minister for Education, Christopher Pyne, has championed his reforms as the building blocks for achieving an Australian Harvard. But at what cost? And why? The Anzac spirit is one of egalitarianism. The idea that Jack is as good as his master, and that come hell or high water we all work towards a society that is better, fairer and more just than the places many of our ancestors left in Europe. Deregulation of fees and cuts to research funds will not achieve that society. His low-income scholarships are a cruel joke for working class kids who will cough up for up to 60% higher fees.

In a similar fashion, the New Zealand Government, which is spending half a billion dollars less on tertiary education than it did six years ago, is busy pushing our demoralised and underfunded sector to pursue its own ideological goal of total commercialisation of the sector. Predictably, the Government's messages are being heard loud and clear by managers at the coalface.

Just last month, the University of Auckland doled out three Vice Chancellor's 'Commercialisation Medals'. While I say good on the researchers who were awarded them, I am concerned when 67% of the staff in our survey say that the commercialisation agenda has negatively affected their working life. One staff member said in our survey that 'the emphasis on the commercialisation of education, where money-orientated decisions are eroding the intrinsic value of education...it has damaged collegiality and mutual support.' Many are beginning to see how these issues are deeply connected.

### For-the-few agenda

It is becoming clear that for our governments and their ideological allies to achieve their commercialised, for-the-few agenda, they need insecure workforces. They need staff that work away in fear and have little or no capacity to challenge their

crooked ideas. As unionists and members of the public who believe in collaborative, accessible institutions, we must fight that agenda. We need to wake up to the changes being done to our sector that make it unrecognisable, but for more than ourselves. This is a battle for the heart of the tertiary education sector. It's about whether tertiary education this century will be about congeniality, debate and cooperation; or division, dictation and competition.

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### Hope for the future

Our sector is supposed to be the critic and conscience of our societies. How can we fulfil that role when we work in fear of our livelihoods? With the number of reviews, restructurings and redundancies rife within the New Zealand tertiary education sector how can our comrades be expected to be that critical, leading voice under a cloud of fear, let alone be certain they have a job come Monday.

The answer is they can't. But it can be different. The insecurity juggernaut can be halted. With no Coalition majority in the Senate, there is a real chance for stopping the Abbott Government's nasty cuts in Australia. With New Zealand's general election taking place in a few short months, there is equal cause for hope that we can put an end to this madness. But we will only get there through our own work and organising.

Let's part that cloud of fear, and amplify our calls for a sector that champions the best in humanity and community. Let's bust the budget and all budgets like it. Let's put an end to this awful cycle on both sides of the Tasman. 💎

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