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The last two months have seen university staff around Aotearoa t

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# 'Underpaid and overworked': The university strikes explained



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Over the last two months, staff at universities around the country have taken action in an effort to secure improved pay and conditions. Charlotte Muru-Lanning looks at what's happened so far, and what might happen next.

As living costs continue to surge, workers around the world are seeing their grocery, rent and power bills swiftly rise while their paychecks stand still – leaving many of us,

in direct terms, worse off. That mood of discontent has become the backdrop for a flurry of strike action deployed by workers in industries from healthcare, transport, education, journalism, retail and beyond.

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...y, the situation has been much the same. And in the last two months, more than university staff across eight universities have taken various forms of industrial

action since a national day of strikes and rallies in early October where they walked off the job for half a day to demand pay increases that keep up with the cost of living. It's the first time in almost two decades that New Zealand's universities have been involved in strike action collectively and it coincides with a wave of significant strikes at universities overseas – in the US, England and Australia – over the past few months.

The Tertiary Education Union (TEU) which covers most of the striking staff at New Zealand's universities has said its members are simultaneously "**underpaid and overworked**".

### **Who's involved in the strikes?**

Both academic staff (lecturers and tutors) and non-academic staff (payroll, IT, administration, finance and cleaning) at eight New Zealand universities; Auckland University, Auckland University of Technology (AUT), Massey University, Waikato University, Victoria University of Wellington, Canterbury University, Lincoln University and Otago University.

### **What type of action have they been taking?**

In addition to last month's strikes, 1,100 academic staff and 500 general staff from the University of Auckland have been taking industrial action since last Friday. The strike on entering grades and working beyond contracted hours will end tomorrow at 5pm. A similar strike at the University of Waikato was called off last Monday after the university said it would suspend any staff who participated.

Earlier in the month, the union delivered an open letter and petition to parliament to ask for urgent government intervention on the current university pay dispute and for a boost in funding to avoid course cuts. The union has also called on members from Victoria University to boycott next month's graduation ceremony.

Unionised University of Auckland staff are currently striking. (Photo: Supplied)

## Why are they striking?

For the most part, the strikes are focussed around demands for higher pay. TEU national secretary Sandra Grey says that while wage increases in the sector usually keep up with inflation, "the wage increases across the sector were very low in the last year". She explains that the additional work accepted by staff to help institutions get through the pandemic has only added to a feeling of discontent. "For two years, through Covid-19, these staff pulled out all the stops to keep the sector running and they can't even get their bosses to agree to help them with the cost of living – it feels very unfair," she says.

"We don't want to be doing this, the staff don't want to be striking," says Grey. "They want to be teaching, they want to be in the library, they want to be running labs, they want to be in the administrative areas of the university. And they really, really, really just want their employer to recognise all they do."

## What do university staff want?

While the union was initially seeking an 8% pay rise, it has now lowered this to 7.2% – a rate that matches the most recent estimate of the annual rate of inflation.

They also want an opportunity for a conversation between the union, university management and the government to address funding and pay rates.

### How have the universities responded?

“All universities responded very similarly,” says Grey. By that, she means with offers far lower than the union and its members are willing to accept. Grey said members at Victoria, Canterbury and Otago were meeting this week to discuss improved offers, but the offers on the table at the five other universities remained a far cry from what members would accept.

RNZ has reported that the University of Auckland had offered staff a 9% pay rise over two years and 11% for staff paid \$60,000 or less. In statement on the university website, University of Auckland vice chancellor Dawn Freshwater expressed disappointment in last month's strikes and said, “Without a significant increase in funding from central government, the University isn't in a position to meet union demands for more.”

AUT told RNZ it was offering a 2.75% pay increase to staff. RNZ also reported that The University of Waikato said its previous offer was a 2% increase with some additional payments.

Most universities have allowed staff to strike without repercussions. However strike action was halted at both Waikato University and AUT as the universities threatened to suspend workers who went on strike. The universities have all “flat out refused” the request for discussions between management, the union and government.

### Wait, I thought academics were well-paid?

As in every sector, some university staff are really well paid, but that doesn't apply to all staff. Grey says, “the average salary is basically the same as any other sector”. And she points to university workers like librarians, tutors or those who work in administrative roles, “who earn less than a living wage”.

Data commissioned by the TEU from BERL found that University of Otago average

salaries have fallen by 10% in real terms over the last 13 years, while the University of Auckland, that figure is 17%. However, Otago Daily Times reported that Universities New Zealand chief executive Chris Whelan rejected the conclusions made about the data.

Most universities have allowed staff to strike without repercussions.(Photo: Enzo Giordani)

## Why now?

There have been previous strikes by separate groups of university staff, but this is the first time in 16 years that staff across universities have collectively rallied for better conditions. The reason this is all happening at once is largely by chance: all of the collective agreements at all eight universities expired around the same time.

“Members from the eight universities decided they would work together this year to support each other because there are common issues,” says Grey.

## What impact does that have on students?

Undoubtedly, any type of strike action has an impact on students. “The intent is to disrupt the university’s business, not to harm students” says Gray, but she added

disrupt the university's business, not to harm students," says Gray, but she added, "they do get caught in this". Despite the disruption during exam season, she's picked up on an appreciation from the student associations and the wider student body that the current situation for staff isn't good for students either. "The people who are taking industrial action support the students daily, and the students see that, and they know that the staff are the heart and soul, they are the universities," she says.

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Staff writer

### What's the root cause of these problems?

For Grey, the current situation is a reflection of a wider structural problem in the sector. Those problems have roots in three decades worth of government policy and regulations which have shifted the way in which universities are funded and how success is measured within and across institutions. "Over the last three decades, we've seen a change where universities aren't talked about as being a social and public good anymore," she says. Instead, "they're seen as businesses".

### Could there be more strikes?

Yes. It's likely that negotiations could continue into the early part of next year and therefore any sort of industrial action is possible if union members decide it's necessary. That includes full or part-day stoppages or not entering grades.

"We're still a long way away in terms of what members want and what is being offered," says Grey. "They want the recognition and they want the pay rises, and they'd be prepared to put their boots on the ground to get that."

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