

This article is a response by the Assistant National Secretary (Industrial) of the Tertiary Education Union (TEU) to an intervention published by the Left TEU Network in *Counterfutures* 15, which critiqued the 'service unionism' model of the TEU. This response engages with the critiques put forward by the Left TEU Network, but it also provides some clarifications to the TEU's position in the current political and legal environment. The response goes on to illustrate the steps that the TEU has taken towards an 'organising union', especially in light of its recent structural changes and implementation of strategies. Ultimately, the article concludes that any changes in the TEU's model of unionism must be driven by the membership taking greater responsibility for the Union's goals and actions.

Towards a Member-Led Union: Organising a Way Out of Servicing

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The intervention from the Left TEU Network published in *Counterfutures* 15 was timely.¹ It was uncomfortable reading for many Tertiary Education Union (TEU) staff, who work day in, day out building the Union's collective strength, campaigning while supporting individual members. The issues raised in the article are not new to the Union. Indeed, the TEU has been taking strides towards an organising union for some years. The staff and leadership of the Union are ready to take that step. But members set the goals of the TEU; members are the voice, and they hold the line. As workers and leaders within the Union, we invite members, including those on the Left TEU Network to go from words to action.

This response is not about litigating positions. Some clarifications are, however, necessary. The dialogue between the initial intervention and this response is fundamentally set in the context of a neoliberal agenda in Aotearoa New Zealand that is forty years old and under an employment relations framework that is restrictive. This response will

1 Matt Russell, et al., 'Austerity, Precarity, and Tertiary Union Strategy: Notes from the Left TEU Network', *Counterfutures* 15 (2024), 128–145. The 'Left TEU network' is not a network of the TEU. In order to become a network of the Union, an application must be made to the Union's National Council with 25 signatures of TEU members from the constituent group.

also refer to relevant *Counterfutures* articles over the years. This journal is a community that I personally, and we as a Union, have been involved in since the first issue, and which continues to breathe life into left thought and practice across Aotearoa. We celebrate the work of those published in *Counterfutures* and its editorial direction. The editorial to the first issue of *Counterfutures* stated that the journal was a ‘collective experiment in political thinking and organisation’, with some ‘crucial starting points’ in the form of 11 theses that have guided the journal and served as touchstones when planning a response to the Left TEU Network intervention.² In the spirit of the 11 theses, this response focuses on a ‘politics of collective hope’, and an ‘alternative’ that establishes ‘new ways of organising’.³ More fundamental, however, is the importance of public debate and critical assessment. As a Union, we hear the intervention, and I respond here to explain the current strategic direction of the TEU. I do so in order to demonstrate that the Left TEU Network intervention and the work the Union has been conducting recently have shared goals and a vision for both the Union and the tertiary education sector, with union members at the centre of both.

While the Left TEU Network authors focused their intervention on the TEU’s 2023 ‘Stop the Cuts’ campaign, this response will focus on an ongoing transformation within the Union that attempts to open up member structures, update the Union’s National Industrial Strategy, and move from a servicing to an organising model. We invite you, the TEU members, to be an organised union, and to be so, we need organised members.

Let’s Clear the Air

The intervention from the authors comes when the crisis affecting the tertiary education sector in Aotearoa New Zealand continues to worsen, and union power is being weakened across the board. This context is critical. Patrick Ongley’s 2016 analysis of class in Aotearoa New Zealand is as useful now as it was then. Ongley noted that ‘while the neoliberal period has seen an accentuation of class inequalities, it has probably also seen a

2 Editorial Board, ‘Beginnings’, *Counterfutures* 1 (2016), 9–14.

3 Editorial Board, ‘Beginnings’, 11.

diminishing of class consciousness and the potential for class formation within the working class'.⁴ In unions, we see this predicament on a daily basis, and it is a matter of discussion within the TEU's National Council and Committees, whose members regularly push the need for education and political consciousness raising initiatives that focus on collectivism, solidarity, and the empowerment of workers in their branches.

Government after government have made decisions that force our universities towards a competitive and exploitative model that is notionally funded by the government, but actually benefits private industries who often syphon off these public funds. The funding model has also led to an increase in speculative financial practices by university leaderships that distance all eight universities in New Zealand from the educational, academic, and research-led focus that we expect from them. In an earlier issue of *Counterfutures*, Dylan Taylor explained how the neoliberal state privatises state assets, or converts them into profit-making enterprises.⁵ In the context of tertiary education, Neil Vallely calls this practice the 'fictitious university', in which universities in Aotearoa New Zealand have transformed public funding into forms of 'fictitious capital' that undermine the core functions of universities as public institutions.⁶ Universities, and other tertiary institutions, are increasingly privatised by stealth, by way of a state-managed decline in public funding, while simultaneously being allowed to increase student fees well above inflation, thus increasing private funding by way of the student loan scheme. The state profits from both scenarios, expecting a return on investment from tertiary education institutions and charging fees, and at times interest, on student loans. TEU members know this situation all too well; these are their workplaces. The individualising neoliberal logic that has for decades permeated our universities, and society at large, in Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond, has entrenched a servicing model of unionism into members' own perception of the collective.

4 Patrick Ongley, 'Class in New Zealand: Past, Present, and Future', *Counterfutures* 1 (2016), 95.

5 Dylan Taylor, 'Riots, Strikes, and Radical Politics in Aotearoa New Zealand', *Counterfutures* 7 (2019), 79–115.

6 Neil Vallely, 'The Fictitious University', *Counterfutures* 14 (2023), 10–18.

The history of employment relations and unionism in Aotearoa New Zealand has been succinctly analysed elsewhere.⁷ The legislative framework, and its constraints, have facilitated a servicing model that the TEU inherited. The law limits our power as union members: it holds individualism in higher stead, and it imposes restrictions on trade union activity and the how, when, what of strike action. Ongley analysis of class in Aotearoa New Zealand describes this context clearly.⁸ This ‘balance of power’ between employer and union entails a limit on action and a drive for an individualism beyond unions. Or, put otherwise, the state benefits employers. The strike may have emerged from the riot, but the strike has in turn been restricted by capital for capital, and only permitted at certain, and very limited, times.⁹ The law thus punishes unions and union members.

The TEU, like many active members, is not satisfied that Labour- and National-led governments have tinkered around the edges of the Employment Relations Act 2000. The Act is a compact that has broad agreement between the parties. In the last three decades, the Act has precipitated a slow but steady decline in union membership, especially in the private sector. The Act has individualism at the centre of the equation, and beyond that, it centres around employment relationships between unions and individual employers, with unions having more or less rights to represent members and negotiate cross-sectoral collective agreements as governments shift from left to right. The TEU has continued to grow despite the barriers imposed by the Act, but the Act weakens our collective power.

I will explore the work the TEU is doing to overturn precarious work below, but precarity is the general state of tertiary public education across Aotearoa New Zealand. Precarity is not limited to casual and fixed-term employees, but the whole sector, and all staff within it, are on a precipitous ledge. The democratic roles that existed on our campuses, from Senate to staff representation on University Councils and other bodies, has decreased in favour of government appointments and opaque decision-making at the

7 See, for instance, Dawn Duncan and Gordon Anderson, *Employment Law in Aotearoa New Zealand*, 3rd ed. (LexisNexis, 2021).

8 Ongley, ‘Class in New Zealand’.

9 Taylor, ‘Riots, Strikes, and Radical Politics’.

leadership level of tertiary institutions. Academic and non-academic voice is continually muted. Ideas such as public good, critic and conscience, and even academic freedom are increasingly ‘fictitious’.¹⁰

Who is the Union?

The solution to these neoliberal trends is collective action. While the Left TEU Network intervention puts forward a need for social movement unionism, and suggests the TEU is stuck within a ‘partnership’ approach, the TEU has consistently been the collective body representing a vision for tertiary education. The suggestion that the TEU has not taken strike action in 16 years prior to 2023, or that it does not have a history of industrial action, may be true at only a handful of the Union’s branches. The Union permanently campaigns. Our campaigns revolve around negotiations, which is the legislative lever of our industrial power, but we campaign more broadly: for the living wage, to protect jobs, for better funding, in support of Toitū Te Tiriti, or as part of the Council of Trade Union’s Maranga Ake and Reimagining Aotearoa Together. Our negotiations campaigns are coordinated nationally with strong involvement from TEU members at the branch level.

Shifting the TEU’s focus to organising isn’t as simple as moving up the gears. It requires a shift in the practices and culture of the Union from the membership. An organising union does not involve more paid organisers. An organising union requires an organised and active membership. The conclusion of the Left TEU Network intervention is thus a goal that the TEU shares:

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.¹¹

10 Vallylly, ‘The Fictitious University’.

11 Russell, et al., ‘Austerity, Precarity, and Tertiary Union Strategy’, 145.

It needs noting, however, that the TEU has never seen itself as a vague sense of insurance for workers, but as a member-led industrial union that organises members to be empowered by and valued for their work. Member engagement is critical to strengthening the Union and the membership's voice within the university and beyond.

It is through organising members, building collectives empowered to support and advocate for each other in departments and campuses, and by re-claiming member voice that we not only empower the TEU, but also how we reclaim the university from its increasingly 'fictitious' status.¹² The Union's biggest weakness is not whether a strike is four hours or four days, but rather member turnout at strikes and Section 26 Union meetings (i.e., stop-work meetings) are low. Union organisers need the support and activism of members on the ground to increase participation in member collective actions.

The TEU is a minnow in the wider union movement, but we often say that we punch above our weight. While we don't have the size of the large public and private sector unions, we have brought members into our collective agreements from across the sector. Instead of focusing on a single profession, our collective agreements cover staff from casual and fixed-term to permanent. Our members are cleaners, lecturers, security guards, librarians, research fellows, professors, postdocs, heads of school, payroll officers, administrators, and doctors. With this context in mind, the strategic focus of the TEU over the last 10 years has been to expand coverage in our collective agreements through negotiations. In doing so, we are organising a union for all workers, without hierarchy, as the voice for the whole of the membership.

In his analysis, Taylor sets out social movement unionism as 'an alternative approach to unionism, involving the following features: a grassroots approach to organisation within the union, with delegates and members playing key roles; networking and solidarity with groups outside of the union; and the pursuit of broader social justice aims'.¹³ To meet these

12 Vallely, 'The Fictitious University'.

13 Taylor, 'Riots, Strikes, and Radical Politics', 104.

aims, we need to create spaces within the TEU for grassroots organisation and solidarity with external groups. The Union has a role in leading the mobilisation of other staff, but so do other groups. Supporting groups, such as Protect Otago Action Group, Students Against Cuts, and other collectives that unite students and staff, have a critical role in the successes and failures of any campaign. Activists, students, and community members, including alumni, can influence university leaderships by shining a light on the same issues from a range of perspectives and directions. The TEU's role in any campaign is not a substitute to the role of other groups. Indeed, we are strengthened by them.

Members Leading the Way

The TEU annual conference in 2025 was a goals-setting conference, where a number of iterative workshops were held on goals that were submitted to the Union by members, their networks and committees. TEU conferences are chaired by member leads, and goals were themed by a subcommittee of the Union's Council – the debate comes from branch delegates nationwide. Developing the Union's direction over the next four years is a member process. Debate was crucial to bringing together over 40 goals, which were themed across five broad areas:

1. Security of employment and good work
2. A strong union with engaged and active members
3. Advancing Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Tiriti relationships
4. A strong union fighting for quality, accessible public tertiary education
5. Equality in the union and workplaces.

After two days of debate and deliberation, the conference passed the following four goals:

1. Further integrate the intent of Te Tiriti o Waitangi in everything we do

2. Fight for an accessible, inclusive, and public tertiary education sector
3. Ensure we are an accessible and inclusive union of active and engaged members
4. Achieve ethnic and gender pay equity and pay parity across the sector.¹⁴

Proud to Say Co-Governance

Re-reading an interview with Moana Jackson in issue four of *Counterfutures* brought back memories of Jackson walking up and down the TEU corridors.¹⁵ He brought a vision of unionism for and from Aotearoa New Zealand, despite the colonial paradigms that underpinned unions. Jackson completed a Te Tiriti audit for the TEU in 2015. This audit sparked changes to the Union's whāinga/values, structures and constitution, culminating in the member-delegates voting in favour of co-governance at the TEU National Conference in 2023. The Union's Te Toi Ahurangi Committee of Māori members was elevated, the TEU Council was split into half Tangata Māori and half Tangata Tiriti, we moved to Co-Presidents of the Union (Tangata Māori and Tangata Tiriti), and the Union replicated these structures beyond the national level to individual branches. Instead of Branch Presidents, the Union's branches are moving to branch leadership teams, with a Te Uepū representative. The Union has been conducting Te Tiriti training for nationally elected position holders and for branch leaders.

The Union's National Industrial Strategy, which was reviewed during 2024 and 2025, was endorsed by the 2025 Annual Conference, and it has incorporated the tikanga of co-governance. Jackson suggests that 'it was whakapapa which brought together history and wrong-ness into some

14 The conference also passed a remit in solidarity with union members, workers, academics, tertiary institutions, and the people of Gaza, which is available on the TEU website.

15 Dylan Taylor and Amanda Thomas, "We have Come too Far Not to Go Further": Interview with Moana Jackson', *Counterfutures* 4 (2017), 27–51.

sort of political awareness'.¹⁶ Within the new National Industrial Strategy, whakapapa is the central political idea weaved throughout: the terms and conditions that we defend are those that members fought for before us, and those we fight for are for members still to come. Whakapapa in the Strategy can bring together history and right-ness. As Jackson reminds us, Te Tiriti is for Pākehā as well as Māori. The Union's journey towards co-governance continues regardless of, and indeed in response to, attacks on Te Tiriti by this government.

New Training for a New Face of the Membership

The TEU has transformed our delegate education programmes in order to expand the number of active members within current Union structures and beyond them. Before 2022, the Union's delegate training was limited. Since then, we have established Level 1, 2, and 3 courses, which have trained over 300 delegates between 2023 and 2024. Specific training and workshops are set out for our members who have been involved in pay equity and the Union is revamping education programmes related to the Union's secure work campaign. We are also working with other unions on Health and Safety training, including for psycho-social health. In both 2024 and 2025, we held a three-day activist retreat, which brought in members who are active in their communities, or in other organisations, but who may not have active roles in the Union's branches and networks.

Additionally, new member networks are bringing members into the Union beyond the traditional branch structures. These networks create spaces where our queer members, kaimahi whaikaha, and others can bring in further debate and action into the Union's work. Our precarious workers are some of the most engaged in our delegate training and activist retreats. We are the first foray into unionism for many young workers in Aotearoa New Zealand, who often work in the institutions in which they are also studying. In effect, we are a part of the fertile pedagogical soil where workers pick up ideas to take with them beyond their certificates, diplomas, and degrees. In our context, (free) membership of the TEU may

16 Taylor and Thomas, 'Interview with Moana Jackson', 28–29.

be a student's first encounter with unionism – our member leaders, staff, training sessions, and conferences are formative as this group of members moves to other unionised workforces.

The Left TEU Network intervention sets out a need to do more for precarious workers. Membership is free for casual members, or members who earn less than \$15,000 per annum. The Union has run secure work campaigns nationally and at particular branches over the last five years. A number of Union networks work to reduce precarity, including the Union's U35 network and the National Women's Committee. Organisers regularly overturn fixed-term employment into permanent employment. But we should always do more to reduce precarity.

As a Union, the TEU is a community; it's diverse, supports precarious workers, and empowers its members through education, campaigns, and organising. When discussing the importance of the membership in activist organisations, Ti Lamusse reminds us that '[i]t is our members who get the work done, who carry our message, and who fully agree with our Kaupapa'.¹⁷ A member-led union requires membership taking on responsibility for the Union's goals and recruitment, and it asks them to be active participants in the union's structures. 'To be an academic activist is a noble calling', Jackson says.¹⁸ Likewise, Shannon Walsh concludes that '[p]olitical organisation is something done'.¹⁹ We invite the Left TEU Network, and those TEU members reading here, to become a part of the Union's structures, by becoming an official network, contesting positions in our branch, network, and national structures, and taking part in the Union's actions, stop-work meetings, and report back sessions. Our organisers are steered by the room. The louder the chorus, the clearer the direction.

17 Ti Lamusse, 'Strategies for Building the Revolutionary Left', *Counterfutures* 6 (2018), 127.

18 Taylor and Thomas, 'Interview with Moana Jackson', 50.

19 Shannon Walsh, 'What Divides? The "Academic-Activist Divide" and the Equality of Intelligence', *Counterfutures* 4 (2017), 105.