

Exclusion and inaction: Academic precariat experiences of union representation in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

During the last 40 years, neoliberal reforms to the tertiary sector have led to the casualisation of academic labour and the emergence of an academic precariat in Aotearoa New Zealand. Despite the increasing size of the academic precariat, it does not appear that their voices, concerns, or interests have been adequately represented by the national tertiary union. By drawing on open-text responses from the Precarious Academic Work Survey (PAWS) about what unions could do to improve precarious academic working conditions, we discuss the issues created by the under-representation of precarious academics by the sector union. We communicate the results via four key themes of *exclusion*, *participation*, *voice*, and *organising*. Most participants articulated frustration and disaffection with the union, suggesting the need for a shift in strategy. This study adds to the growing body of employment relations research recognising that employee voices are multiple, diverse, and fragmented; indicating that unions must attend to the differential experiences of people working in the tertiary sector attributable to employment practices.

Keywords: Academic precariat, Casualisation, Representation, Tertiary Education Union (TEU), University, Voice

Introduction

Neoliberal restructuring of the tertiary education sector has increased casualisation of academic labour in many nations, including Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter, Aotearoa; Stringer et al., 2018; Benade et al., 2019). This restructuring has led to the rise of an ‘academic precariat’ (Bauer, 2017; Bone, 2020; Woodcock, 2018) who must cope with the ‘chronic insecurity’ (Standing, 2011) of no guarantee of ongoing employment and minimal career progression (Connell & Burgess,

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2006). At the same time, *who* the average academic is has changed. A greater amount of teaching and research is now conducted by postgraduate students and casual employees (Brandist, 2017; Caivano et al., 2017), who tend to be more gender and ethnically diverse compared with permanently employed academics (Lipton, 2015). However, tertiary unions have been slow to adapt to this shifting workforce, and “concerted collective action in relation to casualisation” remains rare (Rothengatter & Hil, 2013, p. 57). This inaction on an issue that severely affects the working conditions and wellbeing of academic precariat reinforces the idea that they lack voice, even in institutions that are purportedly designed to represent them and their interests (Dundon et al., 2004; Johnstone & Ackers, 2015).

The Tertiary Education Union (hereafter, the union) represents workers in the tertiary sector in Aotearoa. While the union has networks for Pasifika, younger people (aged under 35), the Rainbow community, and national committees for women and Māori, Greene (2015) points out that identity differences are not the only avenue for worker discrimination and exclusion; there are “other forms of difference that relate to contract status and hours of work” (p. 67). In this paper, we argue that the union’s failure to instigate a network that provides voice to people on temporary and casual employment agreements – who represent an increasingly high proportion of university workers – has been a major deficiency in their strategy thus far. This inaction further excludes and marginalises the academic precariat and undercuts an approach fundamentally based on collectiveness, unity and strength in numbers (Bednarek, et al., 2012); hindering the union’s ability to mount a sustained challenge to the neoliberal framework.

Rather than collectiveness, slow union action in response to casualisation has contributed to the emergence of individualised forms of micro-resistance within the ‘academic game’ of audit culture (Kalfa et al., 2018). Audit culture was sedimented in Aotearoa by the introduction of the Performance-based Research Funding (PBRF) model in 2002, whereby a portion of the funding allocated to universities is based on the staff research rankings (Ashcroft, 2006; Curtis & Matthewman, 2005; Roberts, 2013). This individual, score-based, competitive funding model has produced teaching and research outcomes that some have described as ‘academic dystopia’ (Roberts, 2013). In overemphasising research outputs, the system devalues other academic tasks, including teaching, supervision, reviewing, and community engagement (Middleton, 2009; Ashcroft, 2006; Ashcroft & Smith, 2008; Roberts, 2013). As such, competitive funding incentivises universities to strategically optimise their ranking to secure more funding; gaming the system via casualisation of the workforce helps this process (Curtis & Matthewman, 2005; Oldfield et al., 2021). Employees on employment agreements of fewer than 12 months are exempt from PBRF assessment (Tertiary Education Commission, 2018), allowing university administrators to reduce the visibility of non-research staff accounting. Furthermore, casualising teaching roles enable permanent staff to focus more directly on their research outputs, resulting in a higher academic ranking for universities (Oldfield et al., 2021). Consequently, extended casualisation has shifted the nature of the academic career, which was formerly based on the eventual securing of a permanent position (Woodcock, 2018). Today, precariously employed academics often work multiple casual and fixed-term employment agreements for several years (even whole careers; Simpson et al., 2022; Stringer et al., 2018). For many precariously employed academics, the pathway to permanent employment appears to be broken (Salter, 2022), and although the tertiary sector relies heavily on the academic precariat to sustain itself, their voices, concerns, and interests are systematically marginalised within universities (Stringer et al., 2018;

Salter, 2022). While the relative privilege of the academic precariat in comparison to the wider precariat is open to debate (Bauer, 2017; Burton & Bowman, 2022), there is little doubt that the former lives with the kinds of ‘chronic insecurity’ and alienation from their labour, as originally described by Standing (2011) who also describes a corrosive sense of hopelessness from loss of status (position relative to qualifications) and a seeming impossibility of escape to more secure and socially well-regarded forms of employment.

This structural weakness in the union’s representation of precarious workers was clearly demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic when the union fell short in protecting the most vulnerable employees from losing their jobs, hours, and income, as universities attempted to address revenue deficits from the loss of international students (Keogh, 2020; Oldfield et al., 2021; VUW Tutors Collective, 2020). In response, an academic precariat group was organised, under the name of Tertiary Education Action Group Aotearoa¹ (TEAGA), to represent their interests and voice their concerns. After almost 18 months of advocacy, activism, and collective networking (Oldfield et al., 2021), the group perceived a requirement for evidence to influence politicians and policymakers (Simpson et al., 2023). The TEAGA began designing a survey to measure the exploitative working conditions of fixed-term and casual academics in Aotearoa’s universities, including how they had been affected by the pandemic. Noting that this would overlap with the union’s role of conducting research into these issues among their membership, the union arranged to meet with the advocacy group. In this meeting, TEAGA members were able to voice their frustrations over the lack of concern for casual employees in the past (Simpson, et. al, 2023). The union acknowledged some of the issues and offered to collaborate on the PAWS and fund a report summarising its findings.

Below, we outline an alternative union strategy based around an ethos of social justice. Then, we outline the research design, including data collection and analysis methods for this study, before discussing the four themes (i.e., exclusion, participation, voice, and organising) identified during our analysis. We conclude with recommendations for how the union could reform its strategy, structures, and practices to better represent the academic precariat.

Social justice unionism: an alternative strategy for neoliberal times

Since the TEU’s formation in 2009 through the merger of two unions that previously represented Polytechnic and University staff separately (Bednarek, et al., 2012), “a universalistic ideology” seeking to “increase bargaining power through greater numbers” has held sway (p. 551). However, in response to a hostile, neoliberal regulatory environment, a lack of resources, and the constant threat of redundancies from university management, universalism can easily give way to a ‘protective’ (Gall et al., 2011) or ‘business union’ approach (Weiner, 2012). In such an approach, unions concentrate on maximising benefits for their members through collective agreement negotiations rather than challenging the broader system that continually undercuts their base. When the union is in protectionist mode, the demands of the least powerful, most transient group – who have the lowest union participation rates and smallest voice – tend to be side-lined, meaning issues relating to casualisation are de-prioritised in favour of the majority (Simpson et al., 2023).

¹ The authors of this paper are members of TEAGA.

The union's tools for protecting precarious workers are blunted by working within a neoliberal, anti-union employment law framework, instigated by the Employment Contracts Act (ECA) 1992 (Anderson, 1991). The ability of unions in Aotearoa to organise industrial action outside of collective bargaining was hamstrung by the ECA reforms (Kelsey, 1995; 2022), which undermined their role in protecting the rights of vulnerable workers and mobilising against insecure employment practices through solidarity strikes. The ECA also led to the dismantling of the compulsory arbitration process – a system that previously made it easier for unions to protect vulnerable workers by using arbitration courts to force employers into improving pay and working conditions – that had existed since the 1890s (Ryan & Herod, 2006). Instead, the ECA encourages the settlement of disputes through collective bargaining, but is based on the 20th century model of the permanent, full-time, in-person worker (Greene, 2015). In the tertiary sector, while collective bargaining benefits permanently employed academics, it systematically excludes the most precariously employed workers (i.e., Graduate Teaching Assistants, Research Assistants, etc.). People working in these roles are typically employed on temporary agreements lasting six months or fewer, making it difficult for them to benefit from – and be protected by – their institution's Collective Agreement. Further, the provisions that impact them the most, such as the number of hours they are paid for (the Full-Time Equivalent; FTE) and the pay scale of their employment agreement must be negotiated individually with managers outside of Collective Agreement negotiations.

While the neoliberal framework prevents unions' growth, precarisation simultaneously creates strategic problems. First, there has been a decline in workforce solidarity (Kalfa, et al., 2018), because the interests of the precariat are not necessarily aligned with (and in some instances directly opposed to) the interests of permanent academics, undermining the union's universalistic ideology. Second, the precariat is more diffuse, transient, and vulnerable compared with permanent academics, undermining the union's strategy of strength in numbers, and transferring more structural bargaining power to university managers (Allmer, 2018). The academic precariat are less likely to be union members compared with permanent academics, both, because of the expense of membership dues, and because the union structure of membership that is tied to individual institutional branches is not well-suited for people who move quickly between employment agreements and switch universities. The low rate of union membership by academic precariat is also linked to the union becoming controlled by the voices and interests of permanent academics, leaving insufficient space for the most vulnerable and marginalised university staff. This lack of representation discourages the precariat from membership and participation even further (Chatterjee et al., 2008).

Despite this situation, some of the most promising political action in the global tertiary sector has been led by postgraduate students and precarious academics; often born out of desperate economic necessity or discriminatory university policies (Caivano, et al., 2016; Goodwin, 2008; Mandel, 2009). The suspension of the normal 'rules of the game' in strikes and protests has allowed for new voices to be heard from the margins, including raced, gendered and queer identities normally excluded from everyday decision-making in the neoliberal, colonial university (Chatterjee et al., 2008; Connell, 2019). Strikes and protests also allow the freer movement of ideas on how to reorganise academic work and tertiary unions in more equitable, productive directions (McKnight, 2019). Divisions and hierarchies between permanent staff, precarious staff, and students, which

are routinely reinforced by the neoliberal university, can become forgotten on the picket line, as strikers re-orient their identities towards a more politicised collectiveness in opposition to the perceived oppression of higher management (Bauer, 2017; Caivano et al., 2018; Hominh, 2014; McKnight, 2019).

Hence, despite the constraints of the neoliberal legal framework, there is a need for a more flexible orientation towards collective action from tertiary unions that is better able to harness the disruptive energy of the precariat and postgraduate student body (groups with substantial overlap, given that much undergraduate teaching is performed by postgraduate students). This orientation includes an increased willingness to engage with digital activism (Dencik & Wilkin, 2020), the interactive affordances of which can help in consolidating a new collective identity previously fractured by the two-tier system (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Khazraee & Novak, 2018). Additionally, digital activism can result in engagement with broader social justice movements that attract their followers on that terrain. Making these connections to broader social justice struggles has been termed ‘social justice unionism’ (Kezar et al., 2019), and it contrasts sharply with a protectionist or business union approach. Rather than being on the defensive, this approach seeks to make positive gains against neoliberal austerity through grassroots participation and a more responsive, flatter decision-making structure (Uetrict, 2014). Rather than a set-in-stone strategy, it is an ethos that stresses the importance of collective identity and solidarity to the wider union movement. It also ensures that marginalised voices are continuously incorporated within a more flexible, networked structure, with a constant focus on articulating those voices in public campaigns (Kezar et al., 2019).

To date, there has been little research connecting principles of social justice unionism to employment relations theory, with the latter positing that unions are the primary avenue through which employee voice is articulated and participation is facilitated in the workplace (see Armaroli, 2022; Dundon et al., 2004; Johnstone & Ackers, 2015; Pepple & Olowookere, 2021). The association between trade unions and employee voice and participation dates back to the late 19th century (Armaroli, 2022), and has now become so normalised that “*employee voice* is a synonym for trade union representation” (Johnstone & Ackers, 2015, p. 2). Today, having a voice in organisations through a union, with an accompanying participation in decision-making is becoming widely recognised as a democratic right that *all* workers should enjoy (Johnstone & Ackers, 2015; Greene, 2015).

However, the traditional assumption in mainstream employment relations theory is that unions represent and articulate the employee voice to management as a unified whole. As Greene (2015) notes, the unified voice necessarily privileges the interests of “the male, white, full-time, permanent contract worker” (p. 68), which, since the 19th Century, has become the archetype of the unionised worker. Greene (2015) also suggests that unions adopt special interests groups to ensure that the voices of marginalised groups, such as women, younger people, LGBTQ+ and ethnic minorities, are heard. To its credit, the union has networks for Pasifika, younger people (U35), the Rainbow community, and national committees for women and Māori. However, pointed out by Greene (2015), identity differences are not the only avenue for worker discrimination and exclusion, but there are “other forms of difference that relate to contract status and hours of work” (p. 67). Drawing on the following analysis, we argue that the union’s failure to instigate a network that provides voice to people on temporary and casual employment agreements – who represent

an increasingly high proportion of university workers – has been a major deficiency in their strategy thus far.

Methodology

The PAWS² (Simpson et al., 2021) was an anonymous, cross-sectional survey designed to explore the issues, voices, and concerns of precariously employed academics (on fixed-term and casual employment agreements) across the eight universities in Aotearoa. Most questions were developed in collaboration with recognised stakeholders (including the TEU and New Zealand Union of Students' Associations [NZUSA]). We also drew questions from the TEU's annual State of the Sector member survey (Sedgwick & Proctor-Thomson, 2018) and used standardised demographic categories developed by Stats NZ (2023). Question topics covered the nature of employment agreements, employment and workplace conditions, views on academia, health and wellbeing, and the impact of Covid-19. Additionally, three open-text questions asked participants how the government, the union, and universities could improve the academic precariat's conditions. The authors sought the union's approval prior to including the open-text questions. These questions enabled the academic precariat to define the wider structure and the roles of the key sectoral actors in their own voice.

One impetus behind these open-text questions was to use academic precariat's otherwise marginalised voice to politically (re)organise academic work (see Simpson et al., 2023). In this paper, we analyse the free text data collected in response to the question:

As a casual and fixed-term university employee, what step(s) do you believe unions or other advocacy groups should take so that equality, autonomy, and respect could be improved?

The PAWS was designed and hosted in Qualtrics. Participants were recruited through social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook) and non-institutional mailing lists (e.g. union and advocacy networks). The survey was open for four weeks between September and October 2021, and to any person aged 18 or over who had worked as a casual or fixed-term employee in the previous 12 months (i.e., September 2020 – October 2021) at any of the eight universities in Aotearoa. The final sample included 760 participants, of whom 446 responded to the open-text question about how the union could improve the academic precariat's conditions.

We conducted a thematic analysis of free-text responses following the approach outlined by Braun and Clark (2006). Open-text responses were retrieved from the Qualtrics survey and imported into an Excel sheet. Three researchers from the team familiarised themselves with the open-text responses by reading and re-reading the data to become immersed in, and familiar with, its content (Braun & Clark, 2006). After this initial review, we developed a coding frame and applied it to all responses. We then examined, merged, and refined the codes. Throughout the study, we employed strategies such as independent coding, the use of excerpts to support statements, and consensus

² The polytechnics and wananga (tertiary institutions that provide education in a Māori cultural context) were not included in the survey and, therefore, cannot explicitly reflect on the TEU's performance as a union in those spaces. The survey was designed by people with lived experience of the university sector only, who were, therefore, not equipped to address the nuances facing these institutions.

meetings to ensure inter-coder reliability, rigour, and accuracy (see Robinson et al., 2021; Ee et al., 2022).

“Actually give a toss about us”: the issues of exclusion, participation, voice and organising

The findings below are divided into four themes (*exclusion, participation, voice, and organising*) and 19 sub-themes (see Appendix 1 for full list). Together, they highlight different forms of frustration that academic precariat experienced, who often felt that the union could do more to represent their interests in the face of an exploitative system.

Exclusion

Feelings of exclusion from the activities of the union were widespread among participants. The first sub-theme *prioritising* relates to a perception that the union was failing to allocate sufficient importance to the issue of precarity. As outlined by the below participant:

Make precarious contracts an area of focus. I always sign up for the union (I often have to re-sign every few months when one contract lapses and another begins) but I don't feel like my concerns as a precarious worker are in any way prioritised. They often seem to be the first thing the union folds on in negotiations, which means I feel undervalued by the union AND the university.

This participant demonstrated a degree of loyalty to the union by making sure they always sign up for membership, despite being forced to re-apply whenever their employment agreement expired and they were offered a new one. However, they did not feel their loyalty was reciprocated as, according to the participant, claims around fixed-term employment agreements tend to be the first thing the bargaining team “folds on” in collective agreement negotiations, creating a feeling that they are undervalued.

The second sub-theme, *inflexibility*, refers to a perception that the traditional union model of membership paid for by dues subtracted from wages is not well suited to the reality of academic precarity, with the constant cycle of short-term employment agreements punctuated by frequent periods of unemployment. As described in the above extract, this model increases the administrative burden for the academic precariat who is forced to re-complete paperwork for union membership each time they start a new employment agreement. A second, related area of perceived inflexibility, described by another participant below, refers to the continuing dominance of a normative model of the full-time worker that excludes postgraduate students:

Improve the accessibility of union membership and participation to people who are routinely out of work, more outreach to young workers in the sector, and open up membership in some way to graduate students (who are functionally staff as they do original research for research institutes, but are labelled students to subvert employment rights).

Another participant commented on the need to include people who are studying in the model of ‘academic worker’, particularly in light of the exploitation of international postgraduate students, who face additional layers of precarity:

Consider the plight of international students too. Many of the casual employees in academia are international students who are even more disadvantaged compared to New Zealand residents and citizens.

We categorised participant complaints about the union’s structure that centred on individualised university branches under the sub-theme of *location*. The below participant, for example, was forced to join the union at every institution they worked at, which increased their administrative burden. People juggling simultaneous multiple employment agreements at different universities can also experience a sense of exclusion from a focus on face-to-face meetings at branches:

I had to join separate branches for each university I worked at. This was hard and the phone calls and paper work take up a lot of time which again I don’t get paid for[...] The online union meetings were really good last year. Sometimes I am working at different places and it is hard to get to in-person meetings.

Such inflexibility and lack of adaptation to the new realities of precarious academic work contributes towards an overly bureaucratic, *uncaring* image held of the union by some participants. Indeed, the survey received a somewhat frustrated request to “Actually give a toss about us” from one participant. Another survey participant was similarly frustrated by the union’s adherence to the normative model of a full-time worker, linking this to an uncaring, impersonal attitude:

You need to care more about us. I have tried to reach out to the union but got extremely mixed messages about how much I had to pay. The system only catered to paying as a full time staff member. It was ridiculous.

In a further example, an overly bureaucratic, business-union approach resulted in the disaffection of a vulnerable, precarious worker who was looking for a more caring, personal response:

I have approached the union on numerous occasions either to be ignored, redirected or told that nothing can be done for me.

Feelings that the union did not care sufficiently for academic precariat were amplified by perceptions of *inequality* between participants and permanent academic staff, and reinforced by the union’s focus on collective employment agreements. As outlined below, the participant perceived that a collective agreement representing both permanent and precarious academics necessarily creates inequalities because the agreement is shaped by the more powerful group’s demands:

Unions need to seriously review the collective agreements that supposedly guarantee equity with permanent staff but in practice do not support this. As a casual [primary instructor] I have personally felt neglected by union representatives within our school and when rare meetings have been called at times of crisis, the inequities within collective

agreements has [sic] gone unchallenged. We are left in a position where we have no choice but to sign agreements that contain many clauses that don't really apply to us.

As discussed, Aotearoa's legislative framework forces unions to focus their energies on periodic collective agreement negotiations with an emphasis on consensus about the clauses taken to the bargaining table. Inevitably, where there is consensus, the strongest voices will tend to dominate unless concerted action is taken to ensure that does not happen. If the clauses around fixed-term and casual agreements are "the first thing the union folds on in negotiations", as remarked by the earlier participant, the perception that the union plays a role in supporting inequality is reinforced.

Participation

This second theme communicates perceptions that the union could do more to include diverse voices in its advocacy and support work. *Participation* describes how academic precariat look to the union to provide support and avenues to participate in empowering collective action.

The subtheme *advocacy* describes how the union could provide training on the complex terrain of fixed-term and casual employment agreement legislation, and actively establish networks for precarious academics to collectively scrutinise and negotiate employment agreements:

I believe that there should be union-provided advocacy, employment rights training/education, and invitations to members within these groups to meet and network with each other on a regular basis within all tertiary institutions.

This participant comment suggests that negotiating fixed-term and casual employment agreements can be an isolating and disempowering experience. An inexperienced (and powerless) member of the precariat must negotiate terms with an experienced and powerful university (who may not offer future employment if the worker's demands are too great). And while some terms are negotiated through the union-led collective agreement negotiations, the terms that matter most to precarious academics (e.g., salary scale, number of hours, and options for further employment) are left to the individual.

As outlined by the participant below, speaking to the subtheme of *empowerment*, having more active precarious academic union members who have more avenues for participation would have the added benefit of decreasing the need for a costly bureaucracy of employees; enthused, politicised workers would be doing much of the work for them:

Empower individuals to act on behalf of the union rather than creating a duplicate bureaucracy.

Groups and networks that advocate on behalf of precarious academics, postgraduate and international students could also promote the voices of those workers who normally lack voice within university structures. As outlined by the participant below, postgraduate international students face particular vulnerabilities because their visas are tied to their ongoing status within the university, and those students are, therefore, justifiably reluctant to speak out individually:

Make our voices be heard. As a post-doc with a temporary visa, my future is uncertain and I don't have a voice to express this to my supervisors or colleagues for the fear of being seen as an ungrateful immigrant. I have been told a lot of times that I should just be thankful that I'm in New Zealand than elsewhere during the pandemic. If there are advocacy groups, I would like to be able to express this to them and ask them to help us have a voice.

For several participants, another benefit of advocacy groups would be their pedagogic effect, categorised under the sub-theme *education*. As described below, what discourages many of the younger academic precariat from joining the union is the inaccessible bureaucratic structure and a lack of understanding of what unions do. This combination becomes a vicious cycle because an adverse interaction with a union rep or staff may discourage membership or further involvement, making it more unlikely they will become involved and increase their knowledge through participation. More grassroots organising and increased opportunities for participation through alternative avenues of engagement would enable greater pedagogic opportunities:

Unions aren't very approachable or easily understood, and I think a lot of younger workers don't understand their function. I suppose outreach and direct support would be good, but frankly I don't know many under 25 year olds that "get" unions."

Alternative avenues for participation could lead to more events that focus on *issues* (sub-theme) that academic precariat view as a priority, such as bullying and racial discrimination:³

Forums on racial and [workplace] bullying, what this looks like, how to identify it and how to report it.

As described by the participant below, such initiatives should also recognise the vulnerable position that academic precariat regularly find themselves in. The quantitative PAWS data showed that 58.2 per cent of those who had experienced discrimination, bullying, harassment, or otherwise felt unsafe in their workplace, identified supervisors and/or senior managers as the source (Simpson, et al., 2022). The identification of peer advocacy is especially critical when considering that over half of participants identified their supervisor or manager as the person who was bullying them:

I don't know if this helps or if it is already something that exists but enable peers to complain on your behalf if they are willing to stand by you and offer support.

Taken together, these responses highlight the need for the union to provide more participative spaces for precariat academics to generate advocacy and peer support networks for themselves, which could empower them and give them more confidence to articulate their collective interests. This bottom-up approach could also be more democratic and responsive to members' concerns than the current model centred around branch union organisers who are employed by the union rather than a university, and who could therefore potentially hold conflicts of interest.

³ The survey findings showed that 33.7 per cent of respondents had experienced discrimination and bullying, or otherwise felt unsafe in their workplace, with high proportions of those identifying as Pasifika, Māori and Asian as having experienced racism (see Simpson et al., 2022).

Voice

This theme articulates participants' views that the union could do more to *campaign* (sub-theme) on precarity, and work harder to inform the public about the levels of exploitation faced by the academic precariat. As one participant noted, there needs to be some recognition of the inequities inherent in negotiating for a single, unified collective agreement at universities that are structured around a two-tiered system using the exploitation of precarious labour to sustain itself. The perceived lack of priority given to the issue of precarity may increase the sentiment that the union favours the interests of permanently employed staff. Consequently, one participant urged the union to:

Include us in their campaigns. Right now we are invisible and left behind.

Other participants wanted campaign action exposing the lived realities of precarious academic work, arguing that the majority of the general public incorrectly perceive academia as a privileged space, cushioned from the competitive rigours of a neoliberalised employment market. For instance, the below participant suggested campaign work that highlights the unpaid labour regularly performed by fixed-term and casual staff:

I think exposing the exploitative nature of some academic employment would be a start, and fight hard for [teaching support] and [Primary Instructors] to get paid for all the hours they do.

Others argued for the adoption of a more *militant* stance by the union, with several participants urging strike action to disrupt the business models of the universities and draw public attention to under-funding and exploitative conditions. While some highlighted the dangers and inequalities inherent in industrial action, this theme demonstrated the dissatisfaction with the strategy of negotiation and amelioration, which seeks to draw out improvements to working conditions over the long-term. For one participant, this strategy was 'weak and ineffective'.

Further participants wanted the unions to set their sights on the government to improve funding and crack down on exploitative practices by the universities, such as the example below:

Put pressure on government. Strike.

The following participant echoed these sentiments, urging industrial action to force the government's hand in implementing a break from the neoliberal business model:

So long as universities think of themselves as businesses, there's hardly anything that can happen from the inside I think. The "market" won't regulate this. Government has to step in now, forcefully.

Taken together, these responses urge the union to articulate the interests and priorities of the precariat in the form of public campaigns, following its collectivisation in increased avenues for participation.

Organising

Closely linked to *Voice* and *Participation*, the final theme represents participants who believe the union should undertake more active *organising* at the *grassroots* (sub-theme) level. For example, one participant desired “more active organising within [the] precarious labour force at uni”. Linking back to the theme of *Participation*, this participant believed that a more organised precariat labour force would be a more participative one that would be active in campaign issues, such as “support[ing] postgraduate students with racism/sexism issues”.

Other participants demanded “LESS TALK, MORE ACTION!!!!!!!!!!” [sic], and “Agitate!” to shake up “entrenched [...] longstanding” groups who “have an interest in maintaining the status quo”. This includes cosy relationships between “university administrators and faculty who already have tenure”.

An action-based, social-justice union approach would require a greater union presence on campus, with one participant urging the union to “DO SOMETHING to help” [sic] arguing that they had been “completely invisible since a staffing change” at their institution. Another also recognised the link between the under-staffing of organisers and the lack of on-campus action, and they now refuse to “pay union fees as they have done nothing, in fact I was told that they are understaffed and so have to focus on the bigger issues at the time of staff redundancies, merging depts etc”. Linking back to the theme of *Exclusion*, it appeared that this participant felt the union was de-prioritising the issues that affect the academic precariat in favour of issues that primarily affect permanent academics.

Moving to the sub-theme of *power*, the below participant wanted the union to recognise casualisation as an issue that affects *all* academics *and* professional staff. As discussed earlier, precarious academics are more vulnerable and insecure, less organised, and less likely to be union members, meaning the negotiating power of the whole sector is reduced through casualisation:

We only have power if we use it. With the march of casualisation, tenured academics are a vanishing base. We need to recruit casualised workers and organise around their needs - that means not deregistering [teaching support] every time they start a new contract. These are the vast majority of academic staff and we've ignored them for literally no reason.

As well as recognising the threat of encroaching casualisation on union power, this participant advocated for a different approach to organising that is bottom-up and community-based. Rather than generating campaign ideas in the national office and organising around those in a top-down way, for this participant, organising should start from the needs of the precarious worker on the ground to seem relevant to their lived experiences of working in universities.

Taken together, the responses coded under the theme of *Organising* highlight the need for an active, positive and front-footed approach that incorporates avenues for active participation by the precariat in resisting neoliberal austerity in universities. This approach should draw on more spontaneous, risky and disruptive tactics than previous strategies, and connect to an ethos of social justice unionism.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, we drew on open-text answers to the question of how the union could improve the working conditions of participants in the PAWS and critically analysed its representation of the academic precariat. The themes of *Exclusion*, *Participation*, *Voice*, and *Organising*, describe four ways that participants feel their representation could be improved by the union, which we argue should form an evidential basis for a strategic shift from protectionism to social justice unionism. This shift will make the union more democratic, participative, responsive and aligned to broader social justice movements (Kezar et al., 2019), and will also better equip the union to fight neoliberal austerity, which affects all members and undercuts its influence. As union members (current and former), the authors have an interest in seeing a strong union with long-term sustainability that advocates for meaningful systemic change in the tertiary sector. Therefore, below we outline recommendations for how the union could move closer towards social justice unionism.

Precarious worker survey participants articulated widespread feelings of exclusion and a perception of not belonging. This sentiment was linked to a sense of inflexibility in union structures; specifically the separation between university branches. A resulting recommendation is for greater communication and cooperation between union branches, including the pooling of resources, knowledge, and information. A more fluid, networked structure would better reflect the working lives of the academic precariat who often hold simultaneous employment agreements at multiple universities, and ensure that they do not fall between the cracks in terms of membership. Pooling resources and better communications would also enable improved coordination of organising and better advocacy networks.

Another rigidity participants experienced as exclusionary was the focusing of resources and manpower on collective bargaining. Although the neoliberal legal framework necessitates this activity to some extent, we recommend that time and resources are allocated towards on-campus and virtual events, workshops, and seminars encouraging the participation and inclusion of the academic precariat. There also needs to be a recognition that collective agreement negotiations implicitly construct a normative model of the university worker who is permanent, white, male, and full-time. This model is increasingly out of date (Greene, 2015), and particularly so for precarious academics (Bone, 2020; Oldfield, et. al, 2021).

Emblemising the need for a revised model is the postgraduate international student, who, existing in the liminal space between student, migrant, and worker, experiences multiple intersecting levels of exploitation and precarity (Chacko, 2021; Gilmartin et al., 2021). As has emerged from participant voices, postgraduate international students are one of the most vulnerable groups in the university, often with teaching and research employment agreements managed by postgraduate supervisors that are tied to their visa status. We recommend that the TEU advocate for, and encourage union inclusion and participation, by this population; a collective, anonymous voice may be their only form of recourse should they have complaints. Moreover, a campaign in this area could move the union further towards the model of social justice unionism (Kezar et al., 2019), interlinking with other areas of social injustice, such as the structurally racist immigration system, thereby making important allies in the process and motivating younger members to participate.

As outlined in this study, increased avenues for precariat participation would also have a pedagogic effect. The academic precariat would learn more about the workings of unions, the challenges they face, and the kinds of important work happening behind the scenes; thus increasing their appreciation and working to ensure their loyalty. There was a certain disillusionment amongst many of the survey participants who felt that the union was doing little on their behalf. While we recognise that union-employed staff resources are limited, better inclusion could open up the so far untapped resource of precarious activists, who would take on some of the organising labour if they saw their interests reflected in union activities. To many of the academic precariat, the phrase “you are the union” could sound like a hollow cliché, demonstrating the requirement for better avenues for meaningful participation.

Actively advocating for precariat issues would go some way towards addressing the hardened scepticism of many precarious academics, but it must go beyond a standalone campaign on secure work that risks representing precarity as a niche issue rather than one that threatens the sector as a whole. Precarity should become income incorporated into the heart of the union’s campaign strategy – stressed in every press release, every TV interview, while making links to the social justice issue of precarity in the wider economy. In addition, such a communication strategy should ensure that precarious voices are articulated and amplified, so that the general public becomes aware of the dire working conditions of the people teaching our young people. While in a different context, the media engagements and strategy of the University and College Union (UCU) during the recent British university strikes could provide a useful example (UCU, 2023). As well as personal stories, more effort should go into exposing the structural underpinnings of precarity. We argue that there should be an increased focus on challenging the neoliberal system in campaigns – making it clear there are alternative ways of organising the tertiary system.

Currently, there is a general feeling of positivity, solidarity, and unity in the Aotearoa tertiary sector following the 2022 strikes and bargaining campaign, reinforced by resistance to proposed cuts at Massey, Otago and Victoria University of Wellington in the first half of 2023. However, this momentum needs to be built on to avoid returning to a bureaucratic, segmented approach. As demonstrated in this study, the status quo alienates a potentially rich resource of disruptive energy to be found in the academic precariat, given their vested interest in structural reform to the Aotearoa university system.

Finally, we call for more employment relations research that focuses on workplaces – such as academia – where there are divided interests and heterogeneous voices (Greene, 2015; Budd et al., 2022). This research should take into account the employee voice as fragmented and divergent. Rather than assuming the employee voice is a unified whole expressed through the union, attention needs to be placed on the ‘margins of the margins’ (Dutta, 2020). Although neoliberal austerity worsens conditions for all workers and heightens power imbalances between workers and managers (Pepple & Olowookere, 2021), the effects of this worsening are felt more intensely by raced, classed, and gendered identities, as well as people with precarious employment agreements.

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Appendix 1

Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme	Description/Example Quote
Exclusion	Prioritising	Lack of priority given to precarity “Make precarious contracts an area of focus... I don’t feel like my concerns as a precarious worker are in any way prioritised. They often seem to be the first thing the union folds on in negotiations, which means I feel undervalued by the union”
	Inflexibility	Union model of membership from dues from wages not suited to breaks between employment agreements or grey area between postgraduate students and researchers “Improve the accessibility of union membership and participation to people who are routinely out of work, more outreach to young workers in the sector, and open up membership in some way to graduate students (who are functionally staff as they do original research for research institutes, but are labelled students to subvert employment rights)”
	Location	Focus on branches does not capture the lived realities of precarious workers with employment agreements at several different universities “I had to join separate branches for each university I worked at. This was hard and the phone calls and paperwork take up a lot of time which again I don’t get paid for... Sometimes I am working at different places and it is hard to get to in-person meetings”
	Uncaring	Bureaucratic system makes precariat think the union does not care about them “You need to care more about us. I have tried to reach out to the union but got extremely mixed messages about how much I had to pay. The system only catered to paying as a full-time staff member. It was ridiculous”
	Inequality	Focus on collective agreement obscures inequalities “Unions need to seriously review the collective agreements that supposedly guarantee equity with permanent staff but in practice do not support this. As a casual [primary instructor] I have personally felt neglected by union representatives within our school and when rare meetings have been called at times of crisis, the inequities within collective agreements has [sic] gone unchallenged. We are left in a position where we have no choice but to sign agreements that contain many clauses that don’t really apply to us”
	Student status	Need to do more to engage PhDs and international students who are in grey zone “Consider the plight of international students too. Many of the casual employees in academia are international students who are even more disadvantaged compared to NZ residents and citizens”

	Outreach/education	Need for more education/outreach to educate younger people on importance of union “Unions aren’t very approachable or easily understood, and I think a lot of younger workers don’t understand their function. I suppose outreach and direct support would be good, but frankly I don’t know many under 25 year olds that “get” unions”
Participation and advocacy	Empowerment	More grassroots organising to encourage participation “Empower individuals to act on behalf of the union rather than creating a duplicate bureaucracy”
	Diversity	More diversity in operations/membership “Make it free for anyone on a fixed-term contract to join unions, and expand union and advocacy networks. Unions’ internal operations should honour te Tiriti and have Maaori/Pasifika leadership and specific bodies/collectives within the union working to advance the interests of Maaori and Pasifika academic staff and students”
	Advocacy	More advocacy for precariat “I believe that there should be union-provided advocacy, employment rights training/education, and invitations to members within these groups to meet and network with each other on a regular basis within all tertiary institutions”
	Issues	Support on precariat issues “1. Forums on racial and workplace bullying, what this looks like, how to identify it and how to report it 2. I don’t know if this helps or if it is already something that exists but enable peers to complain on your behalf if they are willing to stand by you and offer support. 3. Demonstrate by example how problems will be dealt with. Employees want to know that they are going to be ok and safe”
Voice	Campaigns	More focus on precarity in campaigning “Include us in their campaigns. Right now we are invisible and left behind”
	Exploitation	“I think exposing the exploitative nature of some academic employment would be a start, and fight hard for [teaching support] and [primary instructors] to get paid for all the hours they do”
	Privilege	Need to do more to change the narrative around privilege and academia “Never stop making a noise about how unfair the situation is for early career/casual/fixed term employees. Never stop telling our stories, getting it out into the wider New Zealand consciousness so our whānau doesn’t assume we get paid big bucks”
	Militancy	Need for a more militant stance - create a discursive space to discuss issues “Take a more hardline approach, fight more staunchly for our rights”

	Advocacy groups	<p>Need for advocacy groups for internationals/post-docs</p> <p>“Make our voices be heard. As a post-doc with a temporary visa, my future is uncertain and I don’t have a voice to express this to my supervisors or colleagues for the fear of being seen as an ungrateful immigrant. I have been told a lot of times that I should just be thankful that I’m in New Zealand than elsewhere during the pandemic. If there are advocacy groups, I would like to be able to express this to them and ask them to help us have a voice”</p> <p>Need to speak out for the vulnerable who cant speak for herself</p>
Organising	Grassroots	<p>More active grassroots organising would mean better support as more connected to the issues being faced</p> <p>“More active organising within precarious labour force at uni and also able to support postgraduate students with racism/sexism issues”</p>
	Action	<p>“Organise strikes amongst staff. When teaching and research grinds to a hold [sic] because staff are on strike, the representatives of the universities will be forced to sit down with the unions and hopefully change their position”</p>
	Power	<p>“We only have power if we use it. With the march of casualisation, tenured academics are a vanishing base. We need to recruit casualised workers and organise around their needs”</p>