

National Tertiary Education Union: A Most Unlikely Union*John Michael O'Brien*

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It has become *de rigueur* in Australian universities to point accusingly at the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) when critiquing contemporary working conditions. John O'Brien's new history of the NTEU helps us remember first, that Australian universities have in fact been fortunate in its quite effective union. Second, O'Brien's book further reminds us that neo-liberal policy and widespread casualisation have been imposed not by the union, but by the university management, often aided by government policy. This complex and rich history does not, however, let the union off the hook, through any of its sometimes-controversial decisions. In fact, the warts-and-all account may well be a source of frustration to some who were there, I suspect.

This history of university unionism has been long needed in the history of higher education in Australia. Our historiography has focussed on institutions, individually and collectively and on government policy. A history of this third institutional pillar, which has been so central to the Australian university history, has been long lacking.

John O'Brien was the right Scholar to fulfil this task. A committed Union Member and an Industrial Relations Scholar of long standing, O'Brien combines the knowledge and insights of an insider with the analytical distance of a disciplinary expert. It is difficult to imagine how someone more distant to the union could have accessed or understood the details necessary to this book without his insider knowledge. Similarly, it is hard to imagine other insiders, without O'Brien's analytical distance, being able to discuss issues and events that have been controversial within the union movement with the sort of grace and generosity that this book has achieved.

The "insider" perspective is appropriate to the majority of readers of this book, though I would have liked it to step back a little, just occasionally. The cringeworthy reality that, periodically, tenured scholars earning more than \$100KPA sing Billy Bragg on barricades at the edges of their elite sandstone institutions, could use a little more social and historical distance than this insider account can offer.

The book is structured chronologically, but around emerging themes. The early sections (Chapters 1-2) give the longer history of higher education policy and the legislative and organisational conditions of industrial relations. O'Brien then gives an account of the "transition" period, from 1993 to 1998, where the effects of the Dawkins reforms and the introduction of enterprise bargaining shifted the industrial landscape. The NTEU was forged from several older unions and staff associations: some large, like the Federated Australian University Staff Association and the Union of Australian College Academics, others small and local. The idea, which O'Brien seems to consider largely successful, was that smaller and less powerful institutions would not be left behind, in terms of employment conditions, if the union focussed on a national strategy (see Chapter 3).

The NTEU's centralised structure and its longstanding strategy of focussing on enterprise bargaining at flagship universities has helped force some errors in the book. These are not important from a historical perspective really, but they may highlight some of the problems with this particular union strategy. Academic employees are teaching-research or research, we are told, with few non-casual exceptions (pp. 238-239; though qualified at pp. 278-279). Certainly this may be the case at the flagship institutions, but many of the

tenured scholars who have been forced into teaching-only and teaching-focussed positions at smaller institutions might rightly feel overlooked by the union both strategically as well as in its historical consciousness.

The tens of thousands of sessional scholars employed by universities, too, would be justified in feeling overlooked. A campaign in 2002-2003 to improve the pay rates for casual academic staff was relinquished, O'Brien shows, in favour of a slight improvement for general staff (see pp. 279-280). This unfortunate decision has contributed to many whispers in the university corridors that the union is happy to sell academics out, in order to increase its membership amongst non-academic staff. Despite advocating for strategies that will structurally remediate the effects of widespread casualisation, the conditions of sessional academic labour remain appalling. The reality that good (academic and non-academic) salaries sit atop free labour performed by a growing scholarly underclass is shameful for institutions and the union alike. Perhaps it was politic that O'Brien did little more than hint at this.

These issues appear in the second half of the book, which details the union's role both in the structure and nature of enterprise bargaining (Chapter 4) and in government and university policy (Chapter 5). It reveals the fine line that the union has walked in seeking good employment conditions for university staff while, due to declining government investment in the kind of salary increases the union has secured, also seeking to avoid worsening the effects of deregulation and casualisation.

By contrast to its record regarding sessional teaching, one of the highlights of this history is the NTEU's remarkable success in making universities excellent places for women employees. The success of the "ridiculously ambitious" (p. 265) campaign to secure 26 weeks of paid maternity leave is surely a justified source of pride for both the union and the universities who have implemented it.

The story of the NTEU is a relatively short one: the book commemorates a mere 20 years of history. The reality that the union is one of the key pillars in understanding Australia's higher education system is testament, at least, to its effectiveness in carving out an influential place for itself. It has successfully secured – for some, at least – really quite good salaries. Declining employment conditions, forced teaching-focussed positions, escalating work hours and stress levels and, most importantly, the shameful conditions of casual academic work, remain challenges the union – and all of us working in Australian universities – still need to address (see pp. 293-296).

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