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"The Big Mouth" — an AUT journalism publication

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AUT staff reject new pay offer

by Nicholas Moody and Fiona Peat

Academic staff and management at AUT are still at loggerheads today after staff rejected the latest pay offer.

At an ASTE union meeting on Wednesday, more than 250 staff roundly denounced the new offer, many saying it was "insulting".

The university has offered a further 1 per cent from April 2006, on top of the original proposed rise of 3.5 per cent from November 2005. This would be followed by a 4 per cent increase in 2007.

It also offered to pay back the wages staff lost while on strike last Tuesday.

A further sticking point is the university's refusal to wait six months before passing on any gains to non-union staff. The university wants to wait only two months.

Staff are asking for 6.5 per cent at the end of this year and 6.5 per cent in 2007.

Many staff at the meeting spoke of increasing workloads and low salaries compared to other New Zealand universities.

John Prince, ASTE's deputy chair at AUT, said the union wanted to send a powerful message to vice-chancellor Derek McCormack.

"We think we do a damn good job and we deserve a decent pay rate."

A spokesperson from the office of the vice-chancellor said she could not comment on the union's rejection of the latest offer as ASTE's response was only received late on Wednesday night. The management was yesterday considering its reply.

ASTE members have not held a strike since 1996. That strike lasted six weeks.

Industrial action was suspended earlier this week, but having rejected the university's latest offer staff could resume lightning strikes and withdraw goodwill from today.

A staff member who did not want to be named said the university's offer was unrealistic in the current climate.

"To attract quality staff to AUT you'll have to pay them more. You're overloading people and not paying them enough."

Business lecturer Dr Anne Kerwin said the offer was "very low".

"One person said the staff put in a lot of effort to reach management goals. All we'd like to see is some recognition of thanks in our pockets."

AUT management has received several letters from students supporting the academic staff, according to one union organiser.

But students are divided over the dispute. Many support the staff but others do not want to lose class time without warning through any lightning strikes.

Engineering student Amit Maharaj supports the campaign for a wage increase.

"AUT used to be an institute, but now as a university academic staff should be paid the same as other universities."

"We have more small classes and fewer large lectures. Staff have to work harder because they have more classes."

Hospitality student Jason Blake also supports the staff, but is concerned that he will lose class time.

"I support them getting a decent wage and I don't really mind about the strikes every now and then."

"But if students start missing out then that's not really fair. Planned strikes are OK but lightning strikes are unfair."

Ministry of Education figures, cited in news reports, showed AUT's wages were the lowest of the universities last year — \$57,389 per fulltime-equivalent staff member, compared with the average of \$69,142.

Additional reporting by John Aspden.

Unions backgrounder: the year of strikes — page 19



HOT ZONE: The fire service decontaminated three people who had contact with the powder.

Bio alarm trio back at work

by Claire McMahon and Georgia Dominik Stone

Three Vero Insurance employees who came into contact with a suspicious white powder this week were decontaminated and have returned to work.

Vero chief executive Roger Bell said he was still waiting for the final test results on the powder which arrived in an envelope on Tuesday.

"Initial testing tells us the contents are harmless, but we are deeply concerned about the employees' welfare," he said.

He did not know why Vero was targeted, but believed it was a hoax.

The bio scare led police to cordon off streets around the Dorchester building in the Auckland CBD.

Lower Shortland St was closed for more than two hours while ambulance, police and fire crews evacuated hundreds of workers and decontaminated the site.

Police were alerted to the incident at 9.45am after workers on level 12 of the Dorchester building received the envelope.

Acting deputy chief fire officer Chris Scott said authorities were unsure what the powder was.

"We are taking all precautions necessary and decontaminating the people who came into contact with it."

He understood the three people had minimal exposure to the substance.

"Their progress will be monitored, and we have sent their clothing away for testing."

Auckland University security

specialist Paul Buchanan said that he would be surprised if the substance turned out to be harmful.

The last such scare, two years ago, involved cyanide contaminated envelopes being sent to the NZ Herald, US and British embassies.

"It's a quantum leap from getting cyanide to having anthrax spores in an envelope. It would require bio-medical knowledge as well as access to the spores which are kept in Government research facilities," said Buchanan.

But because it was proven to be effective overseas these stunts attract a lot of copycats.

"For a disgruntled person it's a low cost way of getting back at the man."

Buchanan said police had to respond with the utmost caution and would close any building down — effectively stopping business.

A few hundred people were evacuated from the Dorchester building while police searched the area.

The streets were reopened to the public by 11.30am. But the building remained closed until the envelope had been collected for testing by Environmental Science and Research.

Once the contents of the package have been determined, police will investigate its origin.



SHUT DOWN: Lower Shortland St was sealed for two hours.

PHOTOS: GEORGIA DOMINIK STONE