



RESEARCH ARTICLE



'The dice are loaded': history, solidarity and precarity in Australian universities

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ABSTRACT

This article responds to debate over casualisation within the Australian Historical Association (AHA) and within the history profession in Australia more generally. It is argued that competing interests increasingly govern relations between salaried and casual academics. The article seeks to historicise these competing interests within the discipline in the history of Australian universities since the late 1980s. The authors draw on Marx's descriptions of the 'reserve army of labour' and recent sociological debates over precarity to describe the political economy that has produced a casual academic workforce. By also analysing the effects of recent shifts in the structure of academic work more widely, the article advocates for solidarity, on the basis of academic historians' shared precarity in the university sector. It then points to how historians might marshal their research resources to derive lessons from the past, in the service of protecting historians as a community, particularly for those most affected by the trend towards precarity.

KEYWORDS

Precarity; casualisation; labour; history profession

As soon ... as the labourers learn the secret, how it comes to pass that in the same measure as they work more, as they produce more wealth for others, and as the productive power of their labour increases, so in the same measure even their function ... becomes more and more precarious for them. (Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1 (1976), p. 793¹)

In March 2018, Australian Historical Association (AHA) members Martin Crotty and Paul Sendziuk released a commissioned report on the state of the History discipline in Australia. This included a study of fields of history teaching and the levels and genders of permanent, fixed-term and honorary academic staff.² The report was part of a pattern of periodic reviews of the conditions of history teaching in Australian universities over several decades, which traditionally did not take casual or sessional academic staff into account, mostly due to methodological complications in doing so – though also

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¹Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, reprint (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), 793.

²Martin Crotty and Paul Sendziuk, *The State of the Discipline: University History in Australia and New Zealand*, Report to the Australian Historical Association Executive (Sydney: Australian Historical Association, 2018).

because, in previous decades, casual labour was not as important a component of historical work as it is now.

To the authors' evident surprise, some of the large and growing cohort of casually employed historians in Australian universities took issue with the sense of marginalisation they experienced by being excluded from this analysis of the 'state of the discipline'. We argue here that the conflict that resulted on Twitter and at the AHA conference that year points to the competing interests increasingly governing relations between salaried and casual academics. Labour-market segmentation and the growth of a precarious 'class' (branded by Guy Standing as the 'precariat') has intensified over the past three decades.³ Both casual and salaried academics are subject to the managerialism that has structured university governance since the Dawkins reforms of 1987.⁴ Salaried academics, however, enjoy career and wage benefits unavailable to casuals. Moreover, they also often control what scarce resources are available to casuals, through competitive bursaries, employment as research assistants and through teaching allocations. Here, we understand casual staff as those on temporary and sessional contracts for teaching and/or research who do not accrue leave entitlements, and salaried as those with 'permanent' teaching and/or research roles. Academic employment is more complex than these categories allow for, and precarity also expresses itself in fixed-term contracts for teaching and/or research, in postdoctoral fellowships with limited tenure and funding conditions, and in teaching-only or teaching-focused positions in a context where research and scholarly publications are required for academic career progression. Nevertheless, this basic distinction is necessary to begin discussion.

This article seeks to historicise these competing interests within our discipline in the history of Australian universities since the late 1980s. History is not unique in this, though we suggest the discipline has some unique properties that may have exacerbated the problem – and which may, in turn, help present potential solutions.

As authors, we are two historians and an Indigenous studies and education academic with a historical focus. Hannah Forsyth has published significant research in the history of Australian higher education. Andrew Bonnell has held elected positions within the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) since 2002, at both branch and national levels, and has successfully organised casual workers to negotiate improved conditions in collective agreements. Amy Thomas works regularly as a casually employed academic and has been an activist for casuals' workplace rights.

First, we consider existing literature on history as a discipline in Australia to understand the reshaping of Australian universities in the neoliberal era. We then place this in the wider economic context and consider the general phenomenon of casualisation. Next, we outline the specific nature of the problem in Australian universities, and in history as a discipline. We argue Karl Marx's account of the rise of capitalism in mid-nineteenth-century Europe described logics that apply to the nature of the academic

³Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011); Robyn May, David Peetz and Glenda Strachan, 'The Casual Academic Workforce and Labour Market Segmentation in Australia', *Labour and Industry: A Journal of the Social and Economic Relations of Work* 23, no. 3 (2013): 258–275. On labour market segmentation in general, see Frank Wilkinson, ed., *The Dynamics of Labour Market Segmentation* (London: Academic Press, 1981).

⁴Stuart Macintyre, Andre Brett and Gwilym Croucher, *No End of a Lesson: Australia's Unified National System of Higher Education* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2017).

workforce in contemporary Australia, and we draw on the idea of the ‘reserve army of labour’ and recent sociological debates concerning precarity to describe the political economy of the casual academic workforce across Australian universities and the growth of competitive relations between casual and salaried academics. By analysing the effects of recent shifts in the structure of academic work, we advocate for solidarity, on the basis of academic historians’ shared precarity in the university sector. We then point to how historians might marshal their research resources to derive lessons from the past, in the service of protecting ourselves as a community, particularly for those most affected by precarity. This article is therefore primarily a piece of historical activism, though it is also positioned within several intersecting historiographies.

Reshaping the university in Australia

First, any study of the staffing of history courses in universities interacts with Australia’s considerable scholarship on history teaching, which is perhaps best represented by Jennifer Clark and Adele Nye’s edited collection *Teaching the Discipline of History in the Age of Standards*.⁵ As Clark and Nye’s title suggests, history work in Australian universities operates in an increasingly regulated environment. Many aspects of the work and its environment have been taken out of the hands of academic staff, leading many to make pragmatic, if not revolutionary, changes to their historical practice.⁶

Like the increased regulation of teaching, the growing casualisation of history in universities is in part a consequence of the rising ‘managerialism’ observed in universities in Australia and internationally, affecting both teaching practices and labour conditions.⁷ This has been the subject of higher education studies for some decades, dominated in Australia by the prolific work of educational policy analyst Simon Marginson.⁸ Among the historians of higher education, Stuart Macintyre, Andre Brett and Gwilym Croucher belittle as ‘overwrought’ some of the expressions of widespread academic discontent regarding the managerial consequences of Dawkins’s ‘Unified National System’.⁹ Nevertheless, they do not deny the considerable structural shift from the late 1980s onwards that led to what Hannah Forsyth light-heartedly defined as a ‘Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC) epidemic’.¹⁰ Raewyn Connell’s *The Good University* takes this problem more seriously, describing the ‘lies about universities’

⁵Jennifer Clark and Adele Nye, eds., *Teaching the Discipline of History in an Age of Standards* (Singapore: Springer, 2018).

⁶Greg McCarthy, Xianlin Song and Kanishka Jayasuriya, ‘The Proletarianisation of Academic Labour in Australia’, *Higher Education Research and Development*, 36, no. 5 (2017): 1017–1030.

⁷Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie, *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies and the Entrepreneurial University* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Marc Bousquet, ‘The Informatics of Higher Education’, in Marc Bousquet and Katherine Wills (Eds.), *The Politics of Information: The Electronic Mediation of Social Change* (Stanford, CA: Alt X Press, 2003), 233–257; Marc Bousquet, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Daniel S. Greenberg, *Science for Sale: The Perils, Rewards and Delusions of Campus Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Henry Heller, *The Capitalist University: The Transformation of Higher Education in the United States, 1945–2016* (London: Pluto Press, 2016).

⁸Simon Marginson and Mark Considine, *The Enterprise University: Power, Governance and Reinvention in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Simon Marginson, *Markets in Education* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1997); Simon Marginson, *Education and Public Policy in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁹Macintyre, Brett and Croucher, *No End*, 243.

¹⁰Hannah Forsyth, *A History of the Modern Australian University* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2014), 125.

that have been propagated as part of this managerial turn. Offering a hopeful thesis for historians as for other university staff, Connell posits labour solidarity – by academic and what she terms ‘operational’ staff – as the only path to the ‘good university’.¹¹

Histories of individual universities confirm the shift in management structures in Australian institutions, which has arguably facilitated the growth of a distinct managerial class, allying senior academic and non-academic administrators.¹² Like the ‘scientific management’ practices of earlier eras, the growth of this managerial class in universities has turned historical work into smaller, disaggregated pieces that can in turn be casualised at lower pay rates.¹³ This is consistent with Greg McCarthy, Xianlin Song and Kanishka Jayasuriya’s suggestion that shifts in global political economy (the twin rise of the regulatory state and the growth of managerialism) have fragmented academic labour into ‘measurable’ components, effectively deskilling and proletarianising university scholars worldwide, a process that commenced with growth in casualisation.¹⁴ The aim, as for all managers throughout the history of capitalism, is to increase the margin between the cost of work and the (largely student fee) income that it produces.

Higher education is not the only ‘industry’ that has been affected by casualisation – workers across western economies report increasing precarity in every sector – though many non-western economies already suffered it, as did non-white or women workers, whose earlier precarity is often overlooked.¹⁵ Labour historians describe a multiplicity of worker responses to changing economic conditions. Verity Burgmann’s *Globalization and Labour in the Twenty-First Century*, for example, offers an explicit labour history counter to new histories of capitalism, which, like Thomas Piketty’s monumental *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, tend to inadequately acknowledge the continuing role of work in the production of value.¹⁶ Alongside sociologists and political economists, labour historians like Burgmann have repeatedly shown that late twentieth-century political-economic shifts have not only resulted in changes to the capitalisation of value, but have increased worker precarity.¹⁷

¹¹Raewyn Connell, *The Good University: What Universities Actually Do and Why it's Time for Radical Change* (Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2019): 56–63.

¹²Carolyn Rasmussen, *Shifting the Boundaries: The University of Melbourne 1975–2015* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2018); Graeme Davison and Kate Murphy, *University Unlimited: The Monash Story* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2012); Stuart Macintyre and R.J.W. Selleck, *A Short History of the University of Melbourne* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003); Julia Horne and Geoffrey Sherington, *Sydney: The Making of a Public University* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2012); Mark Hutchinson, *University of the People: A History of the University of Western Sydney* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2013); Nick Riemer, ‘The Australian Idea of a University’ (Book Review), *History of Education Review*, 47, no.1 (2018): 105–106. [HYPERLINK](#)

¹³On the origins of Taylorism, see Robert Kanigel, *The One Best Way: Frederick Winslow Taylor and the Enigma of Efficiency* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999).

¹⁴McCarthy, Song and Jayasuriya, ‘Proletarianisation’, 1017–1030.

¹⁵Standing, *The Precariat*; Ben Scully, ‘Precarity North and South: A Southern Critique of Guy Standing’, *Global Labour Journal* 7, no. 2 (2016): 160–173; Erik Olin Wright, ‘Is the Precariat a Class?’, *Global Labour Journal* 7, no. 2 (2016): 123–135; Louis Hyman, *Temp: How American Work, American Business and the American Dream Became Temporary* (New York: Random House, 2018).

¹⁶Verity Burgmann, *Globalization and Labour in the Twenty-First Century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014). Recognising that histories of capitalism have had this tendency, Louis Hyman has also sought to redress this in his business/labour history of precarity in Louis Hyman, *Temp: How American Work, American Business and the American Dream Became Temporary* (New York: Penguin, 2018).

¹⁷Marcel Paret, ‘Precarious Labor Politics: Unions and The Struggles of the Insecure Working Class in the US and South Africa’, *Critical Sociology* 41, nos. 4–5 (2015): 757–784; Kevin Doogan, ‘Precarity – Minority Condition or Majority Experience?’, in D. della Porta, T. Silvasti, S. Hänninen and M Siisiäinen (Eds.), *The New Social Division:*

One structural contributor to casualisation across the university system has been the systematic shrinking of public funding per student in real terms. Under the Howard government, Australian public spending on higher education was reduced as a percentage of GDP, at a time when all other OECD countries were increasing their expenditure.¹⁸ Public funding of higher education (as a percentage of GDP) in Australia has continued to lag behind the OECD average since. Factors in the decline have included a reduction in the real rate of indexation of Commonwealth funding from 1995, only temporarily restored under the Rudd and Gillard governments and sometimes savage Federal Budget cuts (such as the Vanstone cuts in 1996 and the 2017 ‘freeze’ in Commonwealth funding). Labor’s demand-driven system (2007–2013), which uncapped enrolment levels, injected the universities with new funds. This new funding was attached to such enrolment growth, however, that funding per student in fact declined, contrary to the recommendations of the Bradley Report of 2008. This increased teaching load, paired with reduced income per student in an environment where each year’s enrolment figures were no longer perfectly predictable, encouraged universities to seek a more flexible teaching workforce. As a result, uncapped student enrolments also produced a spike in casualisation.¹⁹

Casualisation, already under way as a result of changes to research funding, was a key strategy universities have used to cope with cuts. However, the OECD nations that are ‘ahead’ of Australia in funding terms have also experienced considerable increased casualisation. This global phenomenon is as much about the flexibility it offers university managers, as it is about cost savings necessitated by deficiencies in government spending.²⁰

It is no secret that, in the 1980s, Australian business interests advocated for increased flexibility in employment systems, usually at labour’s expense. Formed in 1983, the Business Council of Australia, for example, targeted Australia’s system of compulsory arbitration, which offered Award pay rates for many workers. They maintained that this system restricted the kind of adaptability that would enable Australian business to be competitive in a globalising marketplace.²¹ The Australian Labor Party, through Prime Minister Bob Hawke’s infamous Accords, facilitated this increased labour flexibility.²² The attempted deregistration of the Builders Labourers’ Federation, and the use of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) to break the pilots’ strike, set the scene for the union-breaking strategies of the Howard Liberal-National governments.²³ The Australian Centre for Future Work notes that industrial action has declined ‘97

Making and Unmaking Preciousness D. della Porta, T. Silvasti, S. Hänninen and M. Siisiäinen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 43–62.

¹⁸OECD, *Education at a Glance* (Paris: OECD, 2006), Table B2.

¹⁹Andrew Norton and Ittima Cherastidtham, *Mapping Australian Higher Education 2018* (Melbourne: Grattan Institute, 2018).

²⁰A. Percy, M. Scoufis, S. Parry, A. Goody, M. Hicks, I. Macdonald, K. Martinez, N. Szorenyi-Reischl, Y. Ryan, S. Wills and L. Sheridan, *The RED Report, Recognition – Enhancement – Development: The Contribution of Sessional Teachers to Higher Education* (Sydney: Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2008) HYPERLINK <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asdpapers/135/>; Forsyth, *History of*.

²¹Martin Shanahan, ‘Australian Labour Market Institutions through Time: A Perspective from the New Institutional Economics’, *Australian Economic History Review* 39, no. 3 (1999): 213–238.

²²Elizabeth Humphrys, *How Labour Built Neoliberalism* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

²³Liz Ross, *Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win: Builders Labourers Fight Deregistration 1981–94* (Carlton North: Vulgar Press, 2004).

per cent from the 1970s to the present decade', and argues that this 'near extinction' of organised industrial action is linked to historic low wage growth. Arguably, this is also the context for the sharp rise in casual and insecure employment across the economy more generally.²⁴

A mood for transferring the risks of the price and demand fluctuations associated with globalising markets from employers to workers spread like contagion through Australian and international industrial relations. In May 1980, for example, Ian Miller, a member of the Institution of Engineers Australia, suggested that most members should be self-employed, rather than salaried. Miller argued this would mean that when demand for engineering services increased, individual contractors could meet it; in leaner times, however, corporations and government bodies which at that time were the biggest employers of engineers, would no longer carry their salaries.²⁵ Miller was predicting the kind of labour flexibility that would cross sectors in the following decades. In the United States, Louis Hyman has recently described the strata of ideas concerning flexibility as they worked their way through both business and government especially since the 1970s, which discursively facilitated this growth in casual work.²⁶

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2.5 million workers, or 23.9 per cent of the workforce, were working casually in 2015. Outside education, however, the rate of casualisation increased dramatically across the economy in the 1980s. According to the Parliamentary Library, the rate of casualisation increased from 13 per cent to 22 per cent between 1982 and 1992, meaning current figures represent only a slight rise in nearly three decades. This points to the significance of the 1980s labour reforms initiated by Hawke, and the influence of two recessions.²⁷ Casualisation, however, seems to be more keenly felt and widely debated now than in the era of its emergence.

Casualising history

The fact that across Australian universities every second class is taught by a casual academic paid by the hour is not something that is advertised in higher education's glossy marketing materials.²⁸ Yet if members of the discipline of history partly control their means of production (as we shall discuss), then it is incumbent on the profession to take seriously how precarity is reshaping the way university work is performed. Given the risks that declining undergraduate enrolments present to history, the profession should give increased priority to this issue, and seek to better understand how the process has unfolded and affected our discipline.

In higher education, casualisation continued to rise well beyond the initial growth that struck the rest of the economy. Kinetic Super, a superannuation firm that

²⁴Jim Stanford, *Briefing Note: Historical Data on the Decline of Australian Industrial Disputes*, Centre for Future Work (Canberra: Australia Institute, 2018), 1–10.

²⁵Ian Miller 'Letter to Editor', *Institution of Engineers Australia Magazine* 3, May 1980, 3.

²⁶Hyman, *Temp.*

²⁷Geoff Gilfillian, *Characteristics and Use of Casual Employment in Australia*, Parliamentary Library (Canberra: Department of Parliamentary Services, 2018). https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1718/CasualEmployeesAustralia

²⁸Rob Castle, 'Foreword' in Percy et al., *The RED Report*.

publishes the 'Contingent Job Index', estimate that 43 per cent of jobs in education and training were 'contingent' in 2017.²⁹ According to the Australian Academy of the Humanities, in Society and Culture disciplines (including history), between 2003 and 2008 casual employment was steady at between 18 per cent and 19 per cent. After the growth attached to uncapped student places, casual employment grew to 23 per cent by 2012.³⁰

These figures may well be problematic. One of the difficulties in responding to the challenge of casualisation of history labour has been the lack of transparency in available data. Universities report staff data to the Commonwealth government in some detail, but the number of casual staff employed is cloaked in a 'full-time-equivalent' (FTE) figure, which can mask a much larger head count, and it is by no means simple to derive a head-count figure from the FTE number.³¹ For example, the University of Queensland reports a projected staffing figure of 451 casual FTE 'teaching-focused' academic staff, compared with 1173 full-time or fractional 'Teaching and research' academic staff and 175 'teaching-focused' continuing academics, but the head-count figure of casuals is believed to be significantly greater than the FTE number, amounting indeed to several thousands.³² A report 10 years ago pointed to inconsistent and confusing practices of counting casuals across the sector:

The FTE collapses large numbers of contingent and often dispersed sessional teachers into small numbers. For example, in one university 69 sessional teachers with various roles dispersed across a range of locations were collapsed into 9.25 FTE; in another, 62 sessional teachers were collapsed into 2.64 FTE; and in another, 198 individuals were collapsed into 16 FTE.³³

Nonetheless, all available data indicate a rising tide of casualisation, with Robyn May's 2014 dissertation on the subject reporting an increase of 250 per cent (on an FTE basis) from 1990 to 2011, compared with a 55 per cent growth in non-casual academic employment numbers over the same high-growth, post-Dawkins period. Across all the humanities and social sciences disciplines, Turner and Brass number the growth of the casual 'reserve army' from 3897 in 2002 to 5580 in 2012, an increase of over 43 per cent. In this time, the percentage of full-time academic staff in the humanities and social sciences disciplines declined from around 70 per cent to 65 per cent.³⁴ The Australian Historical Association's *You Matter* report, drawn from a survey of 153 casual members, and released as this article was going to press, provides a damning assessment of the experience of casualisation. A stunning 86.9 per cent of respondents declared they worked unpaid hours.³⁵

²⁹Kinetic Super, *Contingent Job Index Quarterly* (Sydney: Kinetic Super, 2018).

³⁰Graeme Turner and Kylie Brass, *Mapping the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences in Australia* (Canberra: Australian Academy of the Humanities, 2014), 84–85.

³¹For a useful discussion of the methodological problems, see Robyn May, 'An Investigation of the Casualisation of Academic Work in Australia' (PhD thesis, Griffith University, 2014), 41–44.

³²See University of Queensland website at HYPERLINK "<https://mis-xi4-web.mis.admin.uq.edu.au/BOE/OpenDocument/1806222110/OpenDocument/opendoc/openDocument.faces?logonSuccessful=true&shareId=0>" <https://mis-xi4-web.mis.admin.uq.edu.au/BOE/OpenDocument/1806222110/OpenDocument/opendoc/openDocument.faces?logonSuccessful=true&shareId=0>, accessed 2 February 2019.

³³Percy et al., *The RED Report*, 8.

³⁴Percy et al., *The RED Report*, 77, 84.

³⁵Roman Fathi and Lyndon Megarrity, 'You Matter: The Australian Historical Association's Casualisation Survey' Published report. (Australian Historical Association: Report to the Australian Historical Association Executive, 2019).

Casualisation is a profoundly gendered form of exploitation.³⁶ Women have clearly been disproportionately represented in less secure and more junior academic jobs, especially casual positions, while men have continued to predominate in the professorial and managerial ranks.³⁷ This corresponds with international experience wherever neoliberal work cultures have taken hold in universities. Not only have universities traditionally been male-dominated in their upper ranks, but the neoliberal practices of constantly ratcheting up work-performance norms have assumed male career life-cycles and a gendered division of caring work as normative. The gender gap is not only produced vertically, moreover: there is evidence that female-dominated disciplines are subject to more precarious employment than male-dominated ‘hard’ sciences.³⁸ In Australia, women consistently constitute approximately 56 per cent of casual teachers in humanities and social science.³⁹ This means increases in casualisation as a percentage of the whole academic history workforce disproportionately affect women historians, making them ‘non-citizens’ of the profession.⁴⁰ Estimates since 2008 suggest that, as casualisation has increased, the problem has been magnified (see Figure 1).

One outcome of this increase in casualisation is that – as we have already pointed out – it is widely estimated that around 50 per cent of undergraduate teaching in Australian universities, including in the humanities and social sciences, is now being performed by casuals.⁴¹ Already over 10 years ago, the 2008 ‘RED Report’ estimated that between 40 and 50 per cent of teaching was done by ‘sessionals’.⁴² Since there has been a further decade of increasing casualisation 50 per cent figure is now plausibly a minimum estimate. There is cause for concern, if not alarm, about how precarity is impacting the work of doing history.

Casual academics say they are both time- and money-poor. Often living below the poverty line, casual academics work many more hours than they are paid to teach, while also producing significant quantities of research for the university sector, often for free. Since the average age of postgraduate students in Australia is 35, it is reasonable to deduce that many of these scholars are also supporting children.⁴³ Approximately 57 per cent of casual academics report hoping for a career in the

³⁶May, Peetz and Strachan, ‘The Casual Academic Workforce’.

³⁷See also Crotty and Sendziuk, ‘The State of the Discipline’. A weakness of much of the data on gendered exploitation is its binary conception of gender, which does not reflect the diverse gender expression of academics. We assume that the obstacles involved in gender transition and living gender diversity in the workplace are magnified by casualisation and precarity. See Yves Rees, ‘Trans and Gender Diverse Inclusion in Academia; or, Why we Need to Get Better at Pronouns’, [HYPERLINK https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/2019/05/20/trans-and-gender-diverse-inclusion-in-academia-or-why-we-need-to-get-better-at-pronouns/](https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/2019/05/20/trans-and-gender-diverse-inclusion-in-academia-or-why-we-need-to-get-better-at-pronouns/), accessed 20 June 2019.

³⁸Finnborg S. Steinþórsdóttir, Thomas Brorsen Smidt, Gyða M. Pétursdóttir and Þorgerður Einarsdóttir. ‘New Managerialism in the Academy: Gender Bias and Precarity’, *Gender, Work and Organisation* 26, no. 2 (2019): 124–139.

³⁹Karen M. Cardozo, ‘Academic Labor: Who Cares?’, *Critical Sociology* 43, no. 3 (2017): 405–428; Mariya Ivancheva, Kathleen Lynch and Kathryn Keating, ‘Precarity, Gender And Care in the Neoliberal Academy’, *Gender, Work and Organisation* 26, no. 4 (2019): 448–462.

⁴⁰May, ‘An Investigation of the Casualisation of Academic Work in Australia’, 45, see also 235–238 on how gendered precariousness is reflected in staff members’ experiences; NTEU, ‘The Rising Tide of Insecure Employment’, 9–10; Theresa O’Keefe and Aline Courtois ‘“Not One of the Family”: Gender and Precarious Work in the Neoliberal University’, *Gender, Work and Organisation* 26, no. 4 (2019): 463–479.

⁴¹Turner and Brass, *Mapping the Humanities*, 77.

⁴²Rob Castle, ‘Foreword’, in Percy et al., *The RED Report*.

⁴³Hannah Forsyth, ‘Disinterested Scholars or Interested Parties? The Public’s Investment in Self-Interested Universities’, in Margaret Thornton (Ed.), *Through a Glass Darkly: The Social Sciences Look At The Neoliberal University* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014), 19–36.

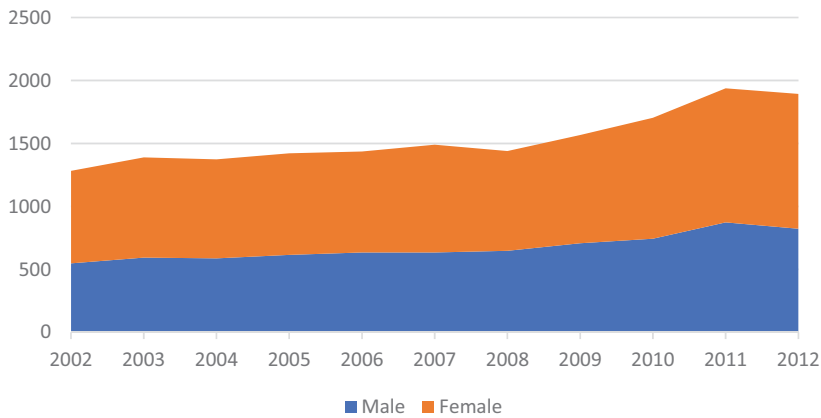


Figure 1. Society and culture academics. (Data source: Turner and Brass 2014.)

university, according to May's 2015 study.⁴⁴ The free labour they contribute exploits their ambition, built upon a wish to derive value from their personal and financial investment through postgraduate study. One respondent quoted in the *You Matter* report explains the personal toll this takes, saying, 'My mental health has been destroyed over the last few years due to the stress of constant work and the chronic anxiety of precarity'.⁴⁵

The reserve army of academic labour

Casualisation of history work in Australian universities is therefore a result of intersecting developments: neoliberal economic policies, reduced government funding per student, fluctuating income streams, and increased managerialism. Importantly, too, it is also a result of a decline in union power across the labour force globally, which in Australia was marked by the end of compulsory arbitration. This was a key precondition to the kind of labour flexibility that increasingly characterised both global capital and global labour.

Universities reflect the broader pattern. The casual workforce has acted as a 'reserve', capable of being brought in or pushed out based on fluctuating needs. This system is analogous to one Marx described regarding structural unemployment in capitalist economies. Unemployment, Marx argued, created a reserve army to fill demand when it increased – but the system could offload them when reduced profit demanded it. This 'mass of human material always ready for exploitation' is a necessary feature of the constant change and crises that accompany capital's production, according to Marx. Here, the capitalist 'sets free' part of a labour force when it is 'surplus to requirements'.⁴⁶

Leaders of corporations and institutions (like universities) see this as a way to make themselves more immune to market and funding fluctuations – or, as a 2016 report by the Australian Higher Education Industrial Association (AHEIA) put it, universities

⁴⁴May, 'An Investigation of the Casualisation of Academic Work in Australia'.

⁴⁵Fathi and Megaritty *You Matter*, 22.

⁴⁶Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 793.

need staff ‘to be agile in the face of sector uncertainty and change’.⁴⁷ Marx argued that both the supply and demand of labour are wholly shaped by the logic of capitalism:

The demand for labour is not identical with increase of capital, nor is supply of labour identical with increase of the working class. It is not a case of two interdependent forces working on each other. *Les dés sont pipés*. [trans: ‘The dice are loaded.’] Capital acts on both sides at once.⁴⁸

In the case of higher education, ‘capital’ (as we may reasonably imagine Australian university revenue, despite being ‘non-profit’) more than acts on both sides; it profits from casualised workers twice. Having received a portion of university income from higher research degree completions (which doubled in the 20 years to 2015), universities exploit their labour, often even before they graduate.⁴⁹ The exploitation goes beyond the use of free and cheap labour to also include early career academics’ desire to enter their field, their internalised anxieties surrounding the merit-based hierarchy and their reliance on the recommendations, even patronage, of senior academic staff.⁵⁰

University managers need to use a wide range of strategies because, unlike in the mid-nineteenth century that Marx described, western economies in the late twentieth century required something more than an unemployed reserve; in the ‘knowledge economy’ (where profitability often hinged on innovation, rather than just labour productivity), the reserve army of labour needed much more education. A professional reserve, like casual academics, was a symptom of the rapid expansion of higher education, flooding the market with the educated experts it needed – or at least, that it *sometimes* needed. As Louis Hyman shows, the consequence is that flexible or precarious work can be found at every level of the workforce.⁵¹ But while this employment is precarious for workers, it is an increasingly stable norm for employers. Universities have permanently integrated this precarious body of labour into their sustained business model, with long-term effects on the structure of academic staffing, including the staffing of history departments.

We suggest this general pattern may be exacerbated by characteristics specific to history. As a scholarly discipline, historians tend still to valorise the products of individual ‘genius’ – or fame, at least.⁵² By contrast with many other disciplines, in history true collaboration is rare, certainly between senior and junior scholars. In James Banner’s recent book *Being a Historian*, the word ‘collaborative’ is used just once, and then only in the context of historical work with others outside academia.⁵³ As a result of our valorisation of senior individuals, resources supporting historical writing are concentrated in the top layers of the discipline’s hierarchy. Our best-known historians are thus also our most securely employed and best resourced. Their security is underpinned by

⁴⁷Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC) and the Australian Higher Education Industrial Association (AHEIA), *Australian Higher Education Workforce of the Future* (London: PWC, 2016).

⁴⁸Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 794.

⁴⁹Universities Australia, *Higher Education and Research Facts and Figures 2019* (Canberra: Universities Australia, 2019).

⁵⁰Ruth Barcan, *Academic Life and Labour in the New University: Hope and Other Choices* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Inger Mewburn, *How to be an Academic* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2017).

⁵¹Hyman, *Temp*.

⁵²On the myth of the solitary genius see Jack Stillerger, *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁵³James M. Banner, *Being a Historian: An Introduction to the Professional World of History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 63–95.

casual teachers and research assistants whose labour lifts those above them. Casual historians, if they are to reach such a place themselves, need to produce work reflecting their own ‘individual genius’, but since their casual labour is likely to be focused on someone else’s, it may well impede, rather than facilitate, their progress.

The relations between salaried and casual historians are thus increasingly governed by hierarchy and competition. What resources are available to casuals are not usually allocated by central management but by salaried historians, including research assistance and teaching allocations. Senior salaried historians sit on the committees that allocate bursaries and grants to early-career and precarious scholars. This could be understood as partly controlling the means of production.

The hierarchy created by history’s valorisation of individual genius generates affective forms of power that are not only exploitative of casual scholars’ more vulnerable positions, but structure casual academics’ dependency on salaried historians. Tony Brown, James Goodman and Keiko Yasukawa, in interviewing casual academics in 2010, found the felt experience of casuals was one of ‘class subordination’.⁵⁴

For casuals, then, their relationship to salaried historians is fraught. On one hand, salaried historians are ‘bosses’, controlling resources and opportunities. This means it is not just a relationship of seniority. On the other hand, salaried historians may well be the embodiment of casual historians’ hopes. There is a risk that salaried historians act as powerbrokers who, for casuals, it is not safe to provoke in pursuit of improved working conditions, or career-boosting activities. Little but individual conscience impedes unscrupulous exploitation. Moreover, since, as we discussed earlier, the success of ‘genius’ historians is underpinned by casual labour, the discipline offers few structural *disincentives* to systemic exploitation. We do not wish to suggest unscrupulous exploitation is the norm (though it does occur), rather to point to this as the inevitable location of structural conflict. However, because of the way the discipline interacts with university structures, this is simultaneously a relationship of class conflict between salaried and casual historians *and* a relationship of shared subjugation of a labour force deliberately segmented by the managerial class. We will consider this shared experience – and the potential for solidarity – next.

Shared precarity? Casualisation, salaried staff and the NTEU

While those employed as salaried historians in Australian universities are relieved of the enormous pressures of living on poverty-level wages, they nevertheless bear a burden. Again, Marx pointed to the structure of the problem:

If its [i.e. capital’s] accumulation on the one hand increases the demand for labour, it increases on the other the supply of workers by ‘setting them free’, while at the same time the pressure of the unemployed compels those who are employed to furnish more labour, and therefore makes the supply of labour to a certain extent independent of the supply of workers.⁵⁵

⁵⁴Tony Brown, James Goodman and Keiko Yasukawa, ‘Academic Casualisation in Australia: Class Divisions in the University’, *Journal of Industrial Relations* 52, no. 2 (2010): 169–182.

⁵⁵Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 784–793.

As political economists have repeatedly shown, the ‘law’ of supply and demand does not always work the way economists might wish, and Marx helps us understand the sources of this contradiction in the case of the demand for labour. Instead of utilising the supply of academic historians, universities instead use the threat of unemployment – or of casual employment – to pressurise salaried historians. The relentless pressure of academic work has been one of the defining features of university employment since the 1980s, just as the system has also experienced too much under-employment.⁵⁶ University systems work to exploit the sense of precarity experienced by academics who are, at least on paper, ‘tenured’. Institutional restructures are increasingly regular, and they threaten employment; research evaluation schemes exploit merit-based insecurities and, at their worst, threaten research careers; endless surveillance limits autonomy; and new tasks are added into academic workloads, as if they were endlessly capacious.⁵⁷

Salaried historians are relatively well paid, which is in part an appreciated consequence of an effective union: but they still *feel* precarious. That precarity represents something real. As Marx described, ‘the greater pressure’ exerted on the working class – in this case, the salaried class – by the threat of the competition from the reserve – in this case, casuals – ‘forces them to submit to over-work and subjects them to the dictates of capital’. As he rather evocatively argued, this ‘completes the despotism of capital’.⁵⁸ There is a vast literature on the problems of academic work and a growing genre known as ‘quit lit’, by those who individually declare that enough is enough.⁵⁹

Because, for the reasons already described, history is particularly wedded to its hierarchy, there is evidence that such overwork is pushed downwards, carried by the most junior even of tenured staff. Women are concentrated there, and women’s sense of professional precarity is further likely to be exacerbated by affective precarity, where overwork disrupts care responsibilities and relational security.⁶⁰ Women also bear, as sociologists have often shown, a disproportionate share of the affective labour of any workplace. In universities that includes the affective labour associated with teaching. The result, again, is that those lower down the hierarchy have fewer career-boosting resources. Again, these are most likely women. It goes some way to explaining the very slow movement of women historians through the ‘pipeline’ to the top layers of the profession.⁶¹

The terms and conditions that structure employment at Australian universities are primarily shaped by each university’s enterprise agreement. These agreements are underpinned by a rather minimal national ‘safety-net’ industrial award, the National Employment Standards, and the Fair Work Act. Such instruments structure the way

⁵⁶Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the Administrative University and Why It Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Bousquet, *How the University Works*; Frank Donoghue, *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); Cris Shore and Susan Wright, ‘Coercive Accountability: The Rise of Audit Culture in Higher Education’, in Marilyn Strathern (Ed.), *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy* (London: Routledge, 2008).

⁵⁷Barcan, *Academic Life and Labour*.

⁵⁸Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 789.

⁵⁹See for example, Leonard Cassuto, ‘The Grief of the Ex-academic’, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Grief-of-the-Ex-Academic/242612>, accessed 25 February 2018.

⁶⁰Ivancheva, Lynch and Kathryn, ‘Precarity, Gender and Care in the Neoliberal Academy’, 448–462.

⁶¹See Crotty and Sendziuk, ‘The State of the Discipline’.

that the managerial layer of the universities governs. They inform the experience of academic history for salaried and casual academics.

The NTEU sought to regulate fixed-term employment in universities, maintaining and attempting to enforce adherence to the principles laid down in the Higher Education Contract Employment (HECE) award of 1998. They attempted to limit the use of fixed-term contract positions to externally funded, so-called ‘soft money’, research contracts, bona fide temporary replacement positions for ongoing staff, and limited-term project work. Unfortunately, these industrial instruments have been unsuccessful in regulating casual employment and may even have encouraged it. Where history departments in the 1980s and early 1990s once employed fixed-term contract tutors, casuals now fill those positions, as well as supplementing full-time, continuing history lectureships, which (relative to the amount of work to be performed) are increasingly rare. This means that the reserve army of casuals have been increasingly integrated into the system, without adequate employment conditions. Ironically this has undermined their purpose: with casualisation surely reaching a proportional upper limit, casuals will decreasingly be available to act as a ‘reserve’ in case of demand fluctuations.

Even when union representatives have battled to support casual working conditions (which, as John O’Brien has shown, has not always been the case), the battle has been consistently fought uphill.⁶² Even relatively straightforward agreements requiring full payment for hours worked by casuals, including for all marking done by casual staff, were hard won – and even then only at selected universities – with management stubbornly resistant. Often bargaining teams relinquish casual conditions early, as too hard to win (or as not representative of their membership). Even in Australia, which has a relatively effective academic union, casualisation has been apparently unstoppable. Some of this can be put at the union’s feet, though we must also remember that the union’s failure to prevent it does not make it the primary cause.⁶³

One experiment with limiting casualisation – a new position of Scholarly Teaching Fellow (STF) (although nomenclature varied at different institutions) – has had doubtful results. This new type of teaching-intensive position, reserved for staff not already in continuing employment (that is, for casual and fixed-term academics), was designed to provide a pathway to continuing employment. Over 600 such positions were created nationally (between 30 universities) in the 2013–2014 enterprise bargaining round. These positions were more attractive to university managements where agreements had previously precluded teaching-intensive academic positions alongside the traditional ‘teaching and research’ profile. Nour Dados, Anne Junor and Keiko Yasukawa, in summarising findings from in-depth interviews with STFs and their employers, argue ‘it is much less certain that they [scholarly teaching fellow roles] offer career mobility without the imposition of health-threatening workloads’.⁶⁴

⁶²John Michael O’Brien, *National Tertiary Education Union: A Most Unlikely Union* (Sydney: University of NSW Press, 2015), 281–284.

⁶³Maarten Rothengatter and Richard Hil, ‘A Precarious Presence: Some Realities and Challenges of Academic Casualisation in Australian Universities’, *Australian Universities’ Review* 55, no. 2 (2013): 51–59.

⁶⁴Nour Dados, Anne Junor and Keiko Yasukawa, ‘Scholarly Teaching: The Changing Composition of Work and Identity in Higher Education’, Refereed papers from the 41st HERDSA Annual International Conference, 2–5 July 2018, Convention Centre, Adelaide, Australia.

As we have already discussed, even for supposedly permanently employed academics, work–life *seems* precarious. The privileges and the control that salaried academics hold over many aspects of casuals' working life is reshaping our profession. Nevertheless, we have also pointed to the pervasiveness of precarity for all those working as historians in universities.

While union intervention in Australia has successfully protected academic salaries and key provisions such as parental leave, problems with the scholarly teaching fellow experiment point to underlying structural problems. The precarity of those who seem 'secure' is a result of structural developments that are becoming well known to political economists and sociologists of work. The labour flexibility demanded by a global economy has meant contradictory shifts in expectations (from 'publish or perish' to an emphasis on 'quality' publishing, for example), institutions that re-structure with alarming regularity, and workload creep that has colonised all aspects of life.⁶⁵ The whole workforce, regardless of the form of employment, is subject to what some scholars are calling a 'feminisation' of work. By this they suggest that all work is increasingly subject to the working conditions long endured by women: 'flexibility' that assures unpaid hours, unrecognised affective labour and systems or technologies that ensure work colonises life.⁶⁶ Union intervention seems insufficient to address problems of excessive workloads, high staff–student ratios and increasing apparatuses of surveillance and discipline, let alone to improve pay or conditions substantially for casual teachers. While efforts to do this, we would argue, deserve our support, there is nevertheless scope for scholars to seek solidarity along multiple trajectories. This includes our discipline, and it is to this that we now turn.

In search of solidarity

Addressing the conditions facing casual historians, and the excessive casualisation of the higher education sector, will need action on a number of fronts, and the building of a sense of solidarity and shared purpose between casual academics and the salaried academic workforce. We hope that recent interest in decolonising and feminist research works to make history a more collaborative, less hierarchal discipline – yet, given the depth of the epistemological and disciplinary norms at stake, we admit this is some way into the future. Many respondents to the *You Matter* survey highlight the need for solidarity to be practised from the 'top down'.⁶⁷ We suggest four different ways, in the short term, that historians can build solidarity to undermine our competitive segmentation: first, through policy, workplace and union advocacy and activism that focuses all attention on casualisation as the issue; second, by building cultures of workplace solidarity through implementing guidelines and principles suggested by casual workers; third, through investigating possible mechanisms of financial and other

⁶⁵Connell, *The Good University*, 81.

⁶⁶Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2005); Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989); Johanna Oksala, 'Affective Labor and Feminist Politics', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41, no. 2 (2016): 281–303; Malcolm Harris, *Kids These Days: Human Capital and the Making of Millennials* (New York: Little, Brown, 2017).

⁶⁷Fathi and Megarritty *You Matter*.

support that salaried academics can offer precarious ones; and last, by developing deeper and more expansive historical inquiry around these issues to inform ourselves and others.

There is an important role for historians in campaigning for universities to create more continuing entry-level jobs in teaching and research roles, and in advocating for more sustainable and stable public investment in higher education. Another key issue is the need for improved industrial relations legislation to help redress the current pro-employer bias in the Fair Work Act. A focus on rolling back casualisation is important, but should also be combined with improving conditions for casuals, including adequate pay for work such as course convening, marking and other administrative work associated with casual teaching, enforceable conversion clauses, and equal superannuation for all staff, including casuals. Given the union's history of failure to advocate successfully for better pay and conditions for casual academics, it is understandable that membership among casuals is low. Serious attention to the issue amongst a salaried union membership, and salaried staff, can help to turn this around.

It is also necessary to educate salaried academics about the situation of casuals – in part, this is our aim here. Salaried academics can be prone to see casual labour primarily as a way of relieving their own workload stress. Having worked casually themselves, some see that casual exploitation is a problem, but imagine this to be a temporary one, a kind of remarkably austere 'starting salary'. The stark segmentation of the academic labour market has meant that if this was the case in the past, it is no longer so.⁶⁸ Moreover, the ethic of flexibility that started with casualisation (and has allowed it to grow so monumentally) also affects permanent staff. As we have argued, even those who are salaried are in other ways precarious. Indeed, in this world of endless university restructures, older, more expensive scholars may well be targets for retrenchment. Salaried academics' sense of vulnerability is grounded in the same political-economic changes that affect casuals.⁶⁹ By taking even some small actions as an association, the AHA can also assist in challenging this.

Flowing from that, our second suggestion surrounds guidelines for salaried historians working with casuals. The University of Sydney NTEU, with the guidance of casual staff, suggest seven principles to abide by for all who are employing casuals. These are based on guidelines developed by the Australian Sociological Association (TASA), after TASA established a working group to identify challenges for contingent sociologists, and to develop practices to mitigate their effects.⁷⁰ They could be generalised to all across the sector as: (1) the timely processing of contracts (no work should be expected before staff have received and signed a contract); (2) payment for all work; (3) payment at the correct rate as defined in the EBA; (4) providing adequate resources (casual staff should not be expected to do work without access to a university workspace, including a computer); (5) including casuals in school/discipline/faculty emails, meetings, websites, and so on, with work performed to be paid; (6) not using casual staff for work

⁶⁸May, Peetz and Strachan, 'Casual Academic Workforce'.

⁶⁹Bronwyn Davies, Michael Gottsche and Peter Bansel, 'The Rise and Fall of the Neo-Liberal University', *European Journal of Education* 41, no. 2 (2006): 305–319.

⁷⁰Kristin Natalier, Erika Altman, Mark Bahnisch, Tom Barnes, Suzanne Egan, Christine Malatzky, Christian Mauri and Dan Woodman, 'TASA Working Document: Responses to Contingent Labour in Academia' (Melbourne: Australian Sociological Association [TASA], 2016).

that is actually ongoing; and (7) payment for training in policies, procedures and other relevant tasks such as staff induction and training.⁷¹

There are discursive issues at stake, too. In addition to these more general principles, we would add:

- Consistently and frequently tell government and university management that casualisation is a moral problem that needs to be resolved.
- Never say or act in a way that says ‘I was casual once too’, which suggests that the *status quo* is acceptable.
- Commit to never exploiting free labour for our own personal-professional gain.
- Find as many ways as possible to make casual academics’ lives even a little bit easier, better or more financially plausible.
- Remind casual academics that this precariousness is about the system, not about them.
- Always try to provide as much certainty as possible for casual academics, and do not cease employment agreements, formal or informal, with no explanation.
- Understand that casual workers are juggling multiple roles, and are likely to have caring responsibilities.
- Offer time to help to assist casual academics with tasks such as funding and job applications, and consider how you can share your ‘insider’ knowledge of the discipline and the university with casuals.

By incorporating these principles into their interactions with casuals, tenured staff can be a part of subverting the divisions that segmentation has imposed on the discipline. To move to our third suggestion, what are some practical ways in which we can build a culture of solidarity through practical mechanisms of support? We are aware of initiatives that the AHA is already undertaking, including casuals sessions at the 2018 and 2019 conferences, a survey of casual members, workforce mapping projects like the 2014 Academy of the Humanities project, and a position on the AHA executive for an untenured historian. Such activities are excellent, and should expand to actively consider and keep the whole membership aware of the welfare of casual members.

It is also time to consider the strategies of workers in history in protecting each other. It may seem like a throwback to imagine a Historians’ Friendly Society, but the reasons they were initially established by Australian workers in the late 1890s still resonate: they were designed to protect workers subject to unemployment or injury and illness (in lieu of sick pay). We may not wish to replicate the secret handshakes, passwords and other quaint practices of those past societies, but we suggest that the idea of historians sustaining one another so as to sustain the profession is one for the AHA to investigate.⁷² We also suggest we do this on the basis of our *shared* precarity, not as yet another mechanism by which salaried academics paternalistically control scarce

⁷¹National Tertiary Education Union NSW, ‘Best Practice: NTEU Guidelines for the Employment of Casuals at the University of Sydney’ (2018).

⁷²David Green and Lawrence Cromwell, *Mutual Aid or Welfare State: Australia’s Friendly Societies* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1984).

resources for competitive allocation to casuals. This is a necessary precondition to real solidarity. Perhaps, for example, we could consider an ‘emergency fund’ into which we all pay, but which is controlled by casuals, for casuals?

Lastly, we suggest a research agenda for historians in the service of frustrating the drive of casualisation. There are difficulties, of course, in drawing straightforward comparisons between labour struggles in Australian history and today’s predicament. It is also the case, however, that some form of ‘precarity’, though rarely called that before the twenty-first century, has characterised employment relations throughout the history of Australian capitalism. While we have given much attention in this article to the period since the 1980s and the violence of Australian neoliberalism towards working conditions, we suggest we could equally gain by drawing on, and expanding upon, the existing rich scholarship in Australian labour history that highlights the innovative and fascinating struggles of workers against insecure labour. There are numerous accounts of particular industries or unions that document efforts to make employment more formal and unionised; waterside workers were among the earliest successes.⁷³ In *The Years of Big Jim*, a biography of Waterside Workers’ Federation leader Jim Healy, Victor Williams writes of the efforts to stabilise employment on the wharves in the 1920s. In the late 1920s, ‘those who tried for better conditions and wage would be left in the pick-up’, that is, chosen last by the foremen for work. One stand against this lasted two years:

In 1927 the Mackay branch took its own action to get equalisation. Although opposed by the stevedores, they formed a dozen gangs, with elected leaders. The secretary and gang leaders stood with the allocator of labour, deciding which gangs should work first, according to their earning for that week.

Because many of these histories are embedded within other, more general histories of the Australian labour movement, there is space to re-contextualise them as part of history of struggle against precariousness, and against the merciless production of capital’s reserve army. As Burgmann shows, while capital cannot do without labour, labour *can* do without capital. She describes a range of innovative responses by workers in a wide range of industries, seeking new methods for claiming workplace rights and a share of the value of their work.⁷⁴

We can also re-imagine the struggles for certain conditions, such as the eight-hour day, and the weekend, in considering how to undermine modern precarity. For example, in 1946 Melbourne tramway workers struck for nine days for penalty rates and annual leave, which was also associated with their demand for a five-day, 40-hour week. Miners and waterside workers struck in solidarity. Though defeated, this highlights that the achievements of the post-war period were not just an inevitable conse-

⁷³Victor Williams, *The Years of Big Jim* (Victoria Park: Lone Hand Press, 1975). See also, Rupert Lockwood, *Ship to Shore: A History of Melbourne’s Waterfront and Its Union Struggles* (Marrickville: Southwood Press, 1990), Ian Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics: The Dynamics of the Labour Movement in Eastern Australia, 1900–1921* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1965), Brandon Ellem, Ray Markey and Jon Shields, *Peak Unions in Australia: Origin, Power, Purpose, Agency* (Melbourne: Federation Press, 2004), Raewyn Connell and Terry Irving, *Class Structure in Australian History* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1979), Bradley Bowden, ‘The Rise and Decline of Australian Unionism: A History of Industrial Labour from the 1820s to 2010’, *Labour History* 100 (May 2001): 51–82.

⁷⁴Burgmann, *Globalization and Labour*.

quence of capitalist boom, but also influenced by workers' solidarity.⁷⁵ Finally, we can also draw from scholarship on the history of labour segmentation based on race and gender, and on histories of the Australian Labor Party and the Communist Party of Australia.⁷⁶

Of course, shifts in the nature of work in the transformation from a manual and manufacturing driven economy to a services and knowledge-driven one means we must contextualise any attempt to draw lessons from the past. As Humphrys forcefully argues in *How Labour Built Neoliberalism*, the fact that Australia's Accords were implemented by a Labor government with essential support from the trade union movement means that the trade union movement's power, density and, to some extent, authority, is much less than it was in the mid-1970s.⁷⁷ Yet these caveats should not suggest that further investigation of struggles against casualisation and labour market segmentation in these contexts cannot inform our approaches today. At the very least, we as historians recognise that understanding the past is crucial to interpreting our current circumstances, and acting to change them.

Conclusions

This article is a result of a promise made to casual historians present at the session on this subject at the 2018 AHA and again at the 2019 AHA, that we would communicate the plight of casuals to the profession more broadly and seek solidarity on the basis of our shared precarity. We have drawn on data derived from government, union and lobby-group studies of casualisation in Australia to suggest that this is a substantial and growing problem that our existing systems of advocacy and reform seem unable to address. History helps us understand it: we can see that casual academics have functioned as a reserve army of labour, fulfilling contemporary structural imperatives for a flexible, cheap teaching workforce. The fact that this is a result of systems common throughout contemporary global capitalism should not prevent us from joining together in advocating for better conditions in the universities for casual scholars. Such improvements ought to be paired with increased government-allocated funding per student.

As we have shown in this paper, our working conditions in history and the discussions we have had among casuals reflect debates in sociology regarding the class nature of precarity, and lead us to suggest growing class conflict between casual and salaried historians.⁷⁸ Class, however, as EP Thompson reminded us, is a relationship, not a thing – and we can challenge the structure and character of the relationships between

⁷⁵Ian Turner and Leonie Sandercock, *A History of Trade Unions in Australia 1978–1983* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1983). See also, Michael Quinlan, *The Origins of Worker Mobilisation: Australia 1788–1850*, Routledge Studies in Employment and Work Relations (New York: Routledge, 2017), Staunton Lynd, *Rank-and-File: Personal Histories of Working Class Organisers* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2011).

⁷⁶See for instance, Meredith Burgmann and Verity Burgmann, *Green Bans, Red Union: The Saving of a City* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2017); Sarah Gregson, 'Defending Internationalism in Interwar Broken Hill', *Labour History* 86 (May 2004): 115–136, Jon Piccini, Evan Smith and Matthew Worley (Eds.), *The Far Left in Australia since 1945* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

⁷⁷Humphrys, *How Labour*.

⁷⁸Wright, 'Is the Precariat a Class?'

the casual and salaried segments of the history profession.⁷⁹ Salaried academics control many aspects of the means of production for casuals, making exploitation too plausible. However, this segmentation can be undermined through recognising how precarity shapes the experience of both salaried and casual historians. Our shared precarity, then, could compel us to confront the problems that flexibility has instated, using examples from history to build strategies that will benefit us all, regardless of our terms of employment.

Disclosure statement

All authors are members of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU).

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⁷⁹E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 9.