

Australia: University staff strike for “day of action”

Our reporters
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Members of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) at 16 universities stopped work yesterday to fight increased workloads, a blow-out in class sizes, casualisation and other attacks on jobs and conditions, which are being driven by the Rudd Labor government’s misnamed “Education Revolution”.

Nationally, thousands of academics and general staff joined the “day of action” protesting the gutting and ongoing commercialisation of tertiary education. But the NTEU is blocking any struggle by university staff against the Rudd government’s agenda. It is seeking separate industrial agreements on a university-by-university basis whose central aim is to enforce Labor’s pro-market assault on public education.

Less than 48 hours before the strike, industrial action was suddenly cancelled by the NTEU at Sydney University and James Cook University in northern Queensland. In a media release, the union hailed its agreement with Sydney University as a “template for the industry,” without providing any details. Sydney University had demanded a “flexibility clause” in the agreement—as provided for by the Rudd government’s Fair Work Australia industrial laws—giving management the power to alter the conditions of individual staff members.

Academics who joined pickets yesterday at University of Western Sydney (UWS) and Macquarie University said that staff workloads were at breaking point. The Rudd government’s last two federal budgets have imposed an effective three-year funding freeze, with universities bringing forward a series of unprecedented demands, including across-the-board spending cuts, retrenchments, new limited-term academic appointments and longer probationary periods:

- Melbourne University is shedding 220 staff and ramping up workloads.
- Macquarie University intends to slash all spending by

5 percent, while enrolments have increased this year by a massive 10 percent.

- Sydney University is also cutting budgets and demanding a “flexibility” clause in its enterprise agreement.

- The University of Western Australia intends to reduce 70 undergraduate courses into five degrees, with inevitable job losses and workload increases.

- University of Canberra proposes to place new mid-level academics on seven-year contracts.

- The University of Western Sydney wants to scrap all set limits on academic workloads, introduce “Associate Academics”—a new type of permanent casuals—and impose three- or six-year probationary periods.

- Deakin University has imposed a trimester system, so that teaching occurs all-year round, setting a precedent likely to be adopted elsewhere.

- La Trobe University vice-chancellor Paul Johnson has warned that the Rudd government’s new funding system will require staff to be shed and others to be hired, making necessary a more “flexible” employment structure.

University management responded aggressively to yesterday’s stoppage. Vice-chancellors sent emails declaring it was illegal for non-NTEU members to take industrial action, while students were instructed to attend classes as normal.

The “day of action” underscored the draconian character of the Rudd government’s Fair Work Australia industrial laws, and the union’s role in policing these measures.

A picket line protocol issued by the NTEU instructed picketers not to ask members of other unions, or non-unionists, to respect the picket line, because they would then be taking “unprotected industrial action,” rendering them liable to fines and disciplinary action. As the protocol demonstrated, the Labor government and the unions are jointly suppressing the basic democratic right

to strike.

The NTEU is working to isolate university staff, and keep them in the dark about the across-the-board measures underway while Rudd and his Education Minister Julia Gillard move to impose a series of reforms that were first put on the table by the Howard Coalition in the mid-1990s.

The centrepiece of Labor's plan, its Bradley Review, will mean a de facto voucher system. Universities will be paid according to the number of students they attract. This "demand-driven" model will force universities to ramp up enrolments, particularly in money-making courses that cater to the narrow requirements of business.

The NTEU fully supports Labor's agenda. The union's 2009 budget briefing paper welcomed the government's "commitments to delivering the most important reforms proposed by the Bradley Review". NTEU president Carolyn Allport declared that the program was "a critical part of the nation building agenda"—underscoring the union's backing for Rudd's "Education Revolution" and its subordination of every aspect of education, from early-childhood onwards, to the productivity requirements of corporate Australia.

In its role as chief enforcer of the Rudd government's program, the NTEU rests on the support of all of the petty-bourgeois tendencies—including Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance—along with the Greens.

At UWS yesterday the union invited Greens MP Lee Rhiannon to address staff. She blamed the decline of universities on the Howard government's 12-year term in office and said the Labor government had "a lot more work to do" to repair the damage. UWS student union president Jacob Carswell-Doherty, a member of the Socialist Alternative group, said he was pleased to see "a fight back after 12 years", implying that the union was leading a struggle on behalf of students and staff. NTEU UWS branch president Terry Mason said the staff had "helped universities survive over 12 years" but now faced "Howard lite". Far from Labor being a paler version of Howard, the Rudd government is prosecuting measures that the previous Coalition leaders failed to deliver lest they provoke a massive political backlash.

Picketing academics spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*. Maike Sundmacher, an economics and finance lecturer at the University of Western Sydney (UWS), said: "Obviously, things are getting worse, and student numbers are climbing. We have to do more work, with less time per student."

Sundmacher had taught at UWS since 2001. "It is

becoming more difficult to provide high-quality teaching, do high-quality research and perform administrative duties. We are asked to be everything, including counsellors." Her undergraduate class size had risen to 75, even in an elective unit, and postgraduate classes from 30 to 50. She said this was not simply happening at UWS. "Universities are being commercialised. Education is not for knowledge anymore. Having a degree has become an occupational requirement, and the universities are getting students in to make money."

"I need time and resources. Often, I have no time to explore subjects. If the numbers increase, I have less time to provide answers in depth and length."

A UWS administrative worker, who asked not to be named for fear of management reprisal, said the number of admin staff in the School of Management was being halved from 15 to 8. This was a "test case" for a university-wide review that would slash jobs and centralise staff in student inquiry call centres. "If we don't take a stand, management will walk all over us," she said. "The workloads are going higher for both academics and general staff."

Several students joined the UWS picket line. Kavita said: "We deserve a better education. The class sizes are too big—20 to 30 in a seminar, with lectures of more than 200. It's hard to concentrate. The government is cheap—we shouldn't have to pay for education. There's nothing for us with this Labor government. It's all the same. This government just talks. They only think about money, not about education."

Maresh, a casual worker at Macquarie University, said increasing staff workloads led to the laying off of casuals, who had no career path. He described the Education Revolution as being "very business driven". He commented: "Universities have to survive and make ends meet. If you go for a business-driven model then you are going to start to cut back on things which don't bring lots of money and you are going to cut back on staff. Macquarie is heading in a big business direction."



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