

Australian government urges universities to tear up staff conditions

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After nearly a decade of severely deteriorating conditions since the previous Labor government launched its free market “education revolution,” university staff and students across the country confront an even deeper and unprecedented assault on jobs, workloads and basic rights.

The Liberal-National government is urging universities to tear up all existing staff conditions, following an August 29 decision by the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to terminate the current enterprise agreement at Perth’s Murdoch University.

Education Minister Simon Birmingham told an *Australian Financial Review* Higher Education Summit on Wednesday the FWC ruling “should be seized, and hopefully can be replicated elsewhere” across the university sector.

Birmingham declared the FWC decision gave managements the capacity to cut costs and absorb a 4.9 percent efficiency dividend, which will cost universities \$1.2 billion over four years, and other multi-billion dollar cuts announced in the government’s May budget.

FWC commissioner Bruce Williams ruled that many enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) provisions, particularly those covering restructuring, redundancies, workloads, fixed-term contracts and staff discipline procedures, imposed “significant inefficiencies and costs” on Murdoch University.

As a result of his verdict, salaries could be cut by up to 30 percent, and redundancy payments could be slashed by at least 33 percent for academic staff and up to 80 percent for professional staff. Parental leave could become unpaid leave, workload restrictions could disappear and it would be easier to dismiss employees for alleged “misconduct” or “unsatisfactory performance.”

Williams terminated the EBA because there was “a financial imperative for Murdoch to make changes in its operations” and because it would encourage bargaining

with the trade unions for a new agreement. Thus, while the unions formally opposed it, the thrust of the ruling is to rely on the unions to pressure their members, and all university workers, into accepting drastically reduced conditions.

In his judgment, Williams stated: “As the unions submit, if the Agreement is terminated this will change the bargaining dynamics. This is because the context for bargaining will be different.”

Just as significant as the FWC ruling is the response of the unions. Having helped university managements for decades to enforce their fiscal requirements—particularly since the last Greens-backed Labor government cut some \$3 billion from university budgets—the unions will intensify their work to stifle all resistance by increasingly discontented university workers.

An email sent to National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members nationally on Wednesday said it was “committed to negotiating a replacement agreement at Murdoch University that, with members support, can recover much of the damage that has just been done.”

In other words, the union will endeavour to cajole its members into accepting a new EBA that will satisfy the management’s demands, while supposedly recovering some of the lost conditions. This response was pre-figured in the FWC hearing itself, where the unions argued that the EBA did not hinder the management’s agenda.

As Williams noted, the unions’ submission was that: “The provisions of the Agreement are unremarkable and comparable to provisions in other enterprise agreements in the university sector. If anything, the Agreement provides the University with competitive advantages.”

This sums up the role played for decades by the NTEU and the other main union covering university workers, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU). Their preoccupation is with providing universities with “competitive advantages”—at the expense of the

conditions of staff and students. Union-negotiated EBAs already have helped managements casualise their workforces so much that only 6.4 out of every 100 new positions created at Australian universities between 2009 and 2015 were tenured teaching or research jobs.

Far from suggesting any mobilisation of members nationally against the new assault, Wednesday's NTEU email asked members to send a "message of support" to anyone they knew at Murdoch University, and to falsely tell their own work colleagues that "it is only the union that can fight these cuts."

About 28 universities across the country have agreements that have expired and are vulnerable to termination, including University of Queensland and La Trobe University. Representing the managements, Australian Higher Education Industrial Association executive director Stuart Andrews told the *Australian Financial Review* "virtually the entire university sector" was seeking to remove similar conditions and the decision would "strengthen their resolve" in negotiations.

The NTEU and CPSU will now try to foist new EBAs on their outraged members as quickly as possible. This especially will be the case at universities, such as the University of Sydney and Western Sydney University, where members have voted overwhelming to take industrial action to resist the management demands. At Western Sydney, the NTEU is simultaneously trying to suppress workers' opposition to last Friday's announcement that up to 150 jobs will be eliminated via a "shared services" restructuring and that all the security staff will be replaced by contractors.

The unions will work even more closely with managements as they scramble to enrol more revenue-generating students, especially full fee-paying international students, and attract funding from corporate investors, donations from the financial elite and research grants from government and military agencies.

With the help of the unions, universities are being transformed from public places of learning and knowledge into corporatised and increasingly privatised institutions serving the interests of big business and the military-intelligence apparatus. Universities also have become money-making machines for the Australian capitalist class, generating more than \$22 billion a year in revenue, mainly by fleecing international students, who face ever-higher fees, larger classes and fewer full-time teachers, as do all the domestic students.

The university unions long ago enlisted—under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of the 1980s and

1990s—in the corporatist efforts of the entire union movement to make Australian capitalism "globally competitive" by forcing workers to sacrifice previously hard-won conditions.

The implications of the FWC decision go far beyond the universities, signalling a new offensive against workers across the board. The ruling extends anti-working class precedents already set in several other industries, such as the railways, timber and electricity generation, where the FWC has torn up EBAs, to white collar and public service workers.

The ruling creates a precedent for employers to cite any "financial difficulties," including those caused by workers' opposition to employer attacks, government funding cuts and poor "market conditions," to justify gutting workers' jobs, wages, conditions and basic rights.

Williams said "a multitude of factors" caused Murdoch University's "current financial circumstances." He listed "market conditions, government decisions, corporate governance failures, poor strategic decisions, some employee resistance to change and at times poor management by Murdoch."

Sections 225 and 226 of the Fair Work Act, imposed by the previous Labor government with the support of the union movement, give the FWC sweeping powers to terminate an EBA that has gone past its nominal expiry date if a commissioner considers it "appropriate" and in the "public interest."

Despite the bitter experiences of the past three decades, the unions are urging their members to support the return of yet another pro-capitalist Labor government backed by the Greens. The need for genuine rank-and-file, or workplace, committees, completely independent of the unions and based on a socialist perspective of challenging the entire framework of cuts and corporate profits is becoming ever more urgent. This includes fighting for free first-class education for students at every level, instead of the ever-greater accumulation of wealth by billionaires.



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