

University of Sydney union branch stages protest strike over wages and conditions

Our reporters
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As part of its negotiations for another enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA), the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) branch at the University of Sydney held a 24-hour strike last Saturday during the university's Open Day for prospective students.

Increasingly frustrated by restructuring, closures and other cuts to conditions, which are accelerating across the country, NTEU members at the university recently voted by 98 percent for industrial action, with 75 percent voting for indefinite strikes. The NTEU is trying to channel this anger as a bargaining chip to seal another regressive EBA with the management.

NTEU members manned pickets at university entrances but did not stop staff or students from entering. Instead they gave out balloons, flyers and candy. Around 100 staff attended a rally at midday outside Fisher Library, where senior trade union officials dominated the platform.

None of the union officials mentioned the cuts being unleashed at other universities, including the termination of the EBA at Perth's Murdoch University (see: "Australian government urges universities to tear up staff conditions").

Nor was any reference made to the role played by Labor governments going back to the early 1980s in instituting the pro-market restructuring of education. Even the current Liberal-National Coalition government's budget, threatening billions of dollars in more cuts, was mentioned only in passing.

These were not accidental omissions. The main political aim of the rally was to try to divorce the issues facing workers at the university from those confronting staff and students everywhere.

NTEU branch president Kurt Iveson limited his remarks to the current negotiations between the NTEU and the university. He said the union opposed the

university's pay offer of 2.1 percent per year, which is a real wage cut, and sought to ensure "job security" during restructuring.

Iveson spoke of introducing benefits for casual staff, including sick leave and 17 percent superannuation contributions by the university, and opposing the expansion of teaching-only roles for academics, which the union worked with management to introduce in 2012.

The union's claim to be fighting in defence of casuals is a cynical fraud. By the union's own admission, over half of all teaching at universities is now conducted by casuals. According to Iveson, 20 percent of staff at the University of Sydney are casuals, compared with 16 percent at the time of the last EBA in 2013.

The real figure could be much higher. According to the university's 2016 annual report, 43 percent of all staff are on fixed-term contracts, which includes casuals, while half of all academics are on fixed-terms, many for as little as one semester.

Unions NSW secretary Mark Morey spoke of the "commodification of education at university and ripping away conditions, pushing the economic responsibility back onto the lecturers and students." He was silent, however, on the fact that the 1983–96 Labor governments of Hawke and Keating began that process and that the single largest cut to university funding, of \$2.3 billion, was inflicted by the Gillard Labor government in 2013.

Though Labor was not mentioned by name, the speakers covered up its record in order to once again corral workers behind this party of big business, while blaming workers themselves for their worsening conditions.

NTEU national assistant secretary Matt McGowan said "people need to be reminded that their conditions

are the work of the union.” In reality, the NTEU, and every other union, has systematically imposed cuts to the conditions of university academics and staff over the past 30 years.

Another political purpose of the strike was to prevent a broader movement developing against the university’s restructuring as part of its *2016 – 20 Strategic Plan*, which the union has facilitated.

Last year, for example, the union helped isolate an occupation of the Rozelle campus by Sydney College of the Arts (SCA) students, while negotiating with the university to shut the campus and merge the SCA with the underfunded Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

At least another 130 staff lost their jobs in the Faculty of Science after restructuring in which the union was complicit. All faculty- and school-based student information desks also were centralised into a new student centre, where workers are on lower pay and casual fixed-term contracts.

Behind the union’s call for “redeployment opportunities” for staff and voluntary redundancies, is its anxiety to show the management it can be relied upon to assist staff members to accept further job cuts.

There is growing discontent among staff members. Iveson revealed that many who voted “no” to a 24-hour strike in the recent ballot voted in favour of indefinite strikes.

The low attendance at the rally did not express any lack of concern among staff but widespread lack of confidence in the union. During the negotiations for the last EBA the NTEU held seven 24 hour-strikes over 18 months. The result was the current insecure working conditions for many staff members.

The WSWS spoke with workers at the rally.

Jessie, who works for the Aboriginal Student Support unit said: “We are picketing because the university is effectively offering us a pay cut. They are not guaranteeing that they will keep people’s jobs with the restructure of the university. They are not guaranteeing that permanent staff will be kept in their positions. They are not offering accessible ways for casual staff members to move into permanent staff roles.

“I was a casual academic in indigenous studies for seven years. I was never offered a way to move into a permanent role... I was a higher degree research student at the time and there were no conditions available for when I was sick or when I had bereavement in the

family.

“As casuals, we aren’t invited to internal staff meetings. You never know what’s going on. Basically we’re employed on a semester-by-semester basis. And we can be fired with an hour’s notice. It’s pretty exploitative.

“There’s no guarantee that I’ll be able to move to another part of the uni if my position becomes void with this new restructure. My department was centralised over the last five years and a lot of people left. It has definitely affected the quality of the services we provide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait students... We’re dealing with students that might be homeless or suffering financial distress or not coping.”

James works in the Physics department and has been a casual for three years. He said: “Management restructures have meant that professional staff that previously developed expertise and knew the job well have been forced to move or been “mapped” to new positions. We think the ultimate goal is to turn us from being effective and specialised workers into being a jack of all trades so we can be moved at the whim of management.

“In my department the three admin staff, all permanent, will now not be continuing into the next year. All of them were considered by the majority in the department as invaluable staff... It’s been a real loss. They’re driving a corporate structure right through, from the faculty to the school to the individual research groups.

“I get semester-by-semester teaching work. My casual contract is renewed annually but my teaching load isn’t guaranteed by that contract. So I get different teaching loads every semester.”



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