

Australian university union pushes sellout deals across the country

Our correspondents
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Australia's main university trade union, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) convened what it termed an "unprecedented national briefing to all university staff" last Tuesday.

The stated purpose of the on-line presentation was to discuss the implications of last month's Fair Work Commission decision to terminate the current union-employer enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) at Perth's Murdoch University.

Although that ruling ended the old EBA, it effectively extended its provisions for six months, to allow the NTEU to negotiate a new agreement that would deliver to management the cost-cutting it is demanding.

During the event, the NTEU blocked all debate, concerned, above all, about the presence of supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), who were calling for a unified struggle of university workers across the country against the Turnbull Coalition government's latest multi-billion dollar funding cuts, and similar attacks imposed over the past four decades.

Those arriving at the briefing were issued with an official NTEU motion. Under the guise of calling for solidarity with the Murdoch employees, the resolution insisted that the only means of defending them from deep cuts to pay and basic conditions was to "negotiate and expedite" EBAs with individual universities throughout Australia.

This is a fraud on two levels. First of all, separate EBAs will only isolate the Murdoch workers by outlawing any industrial action on their behalf at other universities. Secondly, such deals are designed to parallel the kind of attacks on jobs, wages and basic conditions that the Murdoch management is pushing for, thus delivering the sweeping cuts that the Coalition government is demanding.

An NTEU national office media release on August 29 explicitly called for a new EBA deal at Murdoch that would satisfy most, if not all, management demands. "The Union's same lead negotiators have been able to successfully negotiate outcomes or are close to settlement with constructive negotiations at the other three WA [Western Australian] public universities," the NTEU stated. "These negotiations will deliver much if not all of what Murdoch University wants."

After two decades of such EBAs—all promoted by the NTEU as "victories" for its members—Australian university students and workers, both academic and professional, already confront intolerable conditions. Years of cuts, by Liberal-National Coalition

and Greens-backed Labor governments alike, have led to huge class sizes, massive workloads, widespread exploitation of casual teachers and ever-higher student fees.

EBAs negotiated and enforced by the NTEU have directly facilitated the imposition of these conditions by university managements.

At the same time, under the auspices of the EBAs, Australia's 40 public universities have been transformed into money-making machines run by corporate boards. While still nominally public institutions, they are increasingly subordinated to the needs of the financial markets and the political and military-strategic establishments, constantly fighting each other for lucrative student enrolments, mainly in business-oriented courses.

Now, exactly as the *World Socialist Web Site* warned on September 1, the union is rushing to use the Murdoch ruling to ratchet up this assault. At the same time, it is promoting a sellout EBA that it struck on September 21 with University of Sydney management, and then bulldozed through a branch membership meeting, despite considerable opposition. Even the university's NTEU branch committee formally opposed the agreement! The Sydney deal undermines job security, abandons claims for sick leave and superannuation for casuals, and represents a pay cut in real terms for most full-time staff. It is such a brazen betrayal that committee members feared the wrath of their own members.

The "national briefing" consisted of a half-hour report by NTEU national secretary Graeme McCulloch. He declared that union-negotiated EBAs were essential in order to take into account not just the interests of staff, but those of the NTEU, and the universities themselves, given the "funding shortfalls and other circumstances" that they faced.

This statement revealed the union's determination to assist university managements to impose their requirements on their staff. McCulloch further boasted that the NTEU would reach mutually-acceptable agreements with managements on the basis of "rational, reasoned discourse and debate."

In effect, McCulloch was simply outlining the role played by the NTEU, along with the rest of the trade union movement, for the past 35 years, since the 1983-1996 Hawke-Keating government worked hand-in-glove with the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) to impose the fraudulent, anti-worker "Accords," "award restructuring" and "enterprise bargaining" on their members.

In every industry, the trade unions have used EBAs to split and

divide workers, workplace-by-workplace, to help employers become more “competitive” than their “rivals,” in Australia and around the world. With the full support of the unions, all solidarity industrial action has been outlawed, permitting only limited stoppages at individual workplaces during “bargaining periods.”

Ludicrously, McCulloch asserted that NTEU members were enjoying the “highest level” of working conditions for 30 years, summing up the union’s indifference and contempt towards them and the conditions they face: constant waves of pro-market restructurings and retrenchments, soaring workloads and ever-greater pressure to satisfy the political and commercial requirements of governments and big business.

Later, McCulloch referred to the “wider transformation of universities over the past 10 years, beyond recognition,” run by “boards dominated by corporate interests,” and a funding system that “degrades universities.” But he said not a word about the culpability of the last Greens-backed Labor government and its free-market “education revolution,” which cut more than \$3 billion from universities, forcing them to compete with each other to recruit students. Moreover, he covered up the fact that the NTEU has assiduously promoted Labor, the Greens and assorted right-wing Senators as “education champions.”

After his report, McCulloch took a handful of largely friendly questions that he said had arrived via text messages. He brushed aside one question that cast doubt on the “wisdom” of the University of Sydney deal since it prevented any industrial action there in support of the Murdoch workers.

Predictably, McCulloch made no mention of any questions previously submitted via the NTEU’s web page, including several from SEP supporters opposing the Sydney sellout and the union’s cynical response to the Murdoch ruling. Instead, he abruptly shut down the broadcast five minutes’ early, in order to prevent discussion.

At some of the brief campus-by-campus meetings that followed, SEP members of the union spoke against the NTEU resolution that McCulloch had moved, proposing an alternative motion that declared:

“In response to the Murdoch ruling, we oppose the NTEU sellout at University of Sydney and call for a unified fight by university workers nationally against the Turnbull government’s cuts, and to overturn all the previous cuts imposed by both Labor and Coalition governments over the past four decades.”

Allocated two minutes to speak at a sparsely-attended Western Sydney University (WSU) gathering, WSWS correspondent Mike Head, a WSU academic, said solidarity with the Murdoch workers required a break from, and outright opposition to, the NTEU, Labor and the Greens. He pointed to the anti-working class character of Labor and the trade unions, citing their long history of betrayals, and briefly outlined the necessity for a socialist program to pour billions of dollars into education at all levels, from pre-school to tertiary; guarantee the right of all young people to a free, first-class education; and the right of all staff to decent, well-paid and secure positions.

At a half-day strike rally at WSU the previous week, several academics spoke to the WSWS about the conditions they confront.

Martin has been teaching biological sciences at WSU for 16

years on a part-time casual basis, with no sick leave or vacation entitlements.

“I am one of those many people who have been robbed of salaries over the decades,” he said. “I have seen the conditions deteriorate so much. I started out with lectures and tutorials of 16 students, and teaching laboratories. There were 12 laboratories per year. Now the students pay more, for tutorials of up to 36, and only five laboratories per year. We don’t have real tutorials anymore. They are ‘mini-lectures’ because they don’t have more than 400 students!

“My laboratories are the only chance that students get to talk to a warm human being to clear up their confusions. It’s sad. I sometimes feel like part of a scab, that the universities are money-making machines designed to squeeze as much money as possible out of the students, yet pay as little as possible for the transfer of information and educating the students.”

Asked about the role of Labor governments, supported by the Greens, in transforming universities into corporate entities, Martin commented: “I have never felt that Labor represented me. And the Greens are so airy-fairy. Who knows what the Greens are? They kept the last Labor government in office.

“Nobody seems to represent the students. Nobody seems to represent the staff, who are being increasingly exploited. This global trend toward economic rationalism is chipping away at the take-home pay of the workers and it’s been a continuous trend, and I’ve seen no one stepping forward to fight it.

“I’ve asked myself: ‘Which side is the union on?’ I think the union is on the union’s side. Sadly, they just want to keep themselves employed. They would deny they are on the management’s side, but I don’t see any movement against them ... I’m tired of compromising. I want to see someone with the power and authority to fight for workers.”

A **nursing lecturer**, who wished to remain anonymous, said conditions had worsened dramatically over 30 years. “We now have such large numbers of students, such large through-put. There is immense pressure. We have increased workloads, extremely large classes and rely on so many casuals. They are not around to help students, for example, on how to construct an assignment. I have 1,400 students in one unit, being taught by 17 different lecturers on three campuses.”

Commenting on the political situation, he said: “Labor has been at the heart of restructuring for decades ... Sadly, this is the case all over the world. The market forces are very strong. Education is now Australia’s third-largest export earner. We are selling education. We have a business model, but education should not be a business.

“We have converted universities into money-making machines. If you want to survive you have to show that you are making money. What options do people have?”



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