

NTEU betrays staff at University of Sydney

Our correspondent
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Despite considerable anger and bewilderment among the 450 staff members at a union branch meeting on September 21, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) pushed through an initial vote for a major sellout of its members at the University of Sydney. The final vote was 301 for and 139 against, reflecting developing concern about the union's role.

Despite the NTEU's betrayal, however, the proposed new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) still has to go to a ballot of all staff, expected to be conducted by the university in November.

After intense backroom talks with management, the union suddenly called the meeting to vote on an in-principle EBA struck between the management and the union's bargaining committee. By the time the meeting was convened, the NTEU national executive had already endorsed the EBA, in a bid to preempt the vote.

As they entered the room, union members were handed written endorsements of the agreement by the NTEU national executive, and the union's New South Wales (NSW), Queensland and Western Australian state secretaries. These endorsements insisted that the proposed agreement was the only way to answer the Fair Work Commission's termination of the EBA at Perth's Murdoch University.

Just days earlier, the NTEU had staged a one-day strike and rally, claiming to be fighting for job security, protection against restructuring-driven retrenchments, superannuation and sick leave rights for casual staff, and salary increases. All these pretences have been repudiated in the proposed EBA.

At the meeting, the NTEU members were not given copies of the proposed deal, only a typically misleading summary provided by the union leadership. Even according to that summary, however:

- The management can impose forced redundancies in implementing its restructuring plans.

- Casuals will not receive any sick leave, parental leave or 17 percent superannuation and will continue to make up an increasing proportion of the workforce.

- 120 teaching-only roles, with heavy workloads, will be advertised, further undermining the traditional link between academic research and teaching.

- All professional staff positions at HEO 10 and above can be advertised externally, establishing a precedent that can be expanded to all staff levels.

- There are 2.1 percent annual wage increases, which amounts to a real pay cut.

In its letter to the meeting, the NTEU national executive praised the deal as a "breakthrough" and stressed the "central importance" of achieving such agreements at other universities, supposedly "as a means of preventing other universities from seeking agreement terminations."

NSW state secretary Michael Thomson, a longtime pseudo-left member of the union leadership and a former University of Sydney branch president, falsely claimed the deal contained gains for casuals. "The proposed agreement is an important agreement," he wrote, with "important gains for general staff" because they would be "the best paid in the sector."

So obvious is the sell-out that the majority of the NTEU's own university branch committee advocated rejecting it. In a leaflet, the committee nervously raised concerns about trying to sell it to staff when "nothing major has changed." Such an outcome would "seriously [call] into question" members' trust in the union leadership.

The branch committee said the agreement "falls short

of our claims on job security, which is of particular concern to us in light of the forthcoming sweeping restructures” and “contains no concessions on our claims for sick leave and superannuation for casuals.” The proposed EBA also “still represents a real-terms pay cut for a majority of non-casual staff at the university” and “abandons the principle that academic work should link teaching and research.”

The University of Sydney Casuals’ Network, a NTEU sub-committee, issued a leaflet saying: “The NTEU should not give up the fight for casuals’ rights before it has truly begun.” In reality, the NTEU had no intention of mounting a struggle for the rights of casuals, having agreed to successive EBAs for years that have helped the management so much that casuals already do more than half the teaching at the university.

NTEU branch president Kurt Iveson told the meeting he was “actually incredibly proud to be standing here to recommend this agreement.” He threatened that if members rejected it, the university would withdraw its “offer” and “we will face attempts to wind back the gains we have won and attacks on our existing conditions.”

Iveson claimed that, after one 24-hour stoppage, further strike action would only alienate the staff. The fact that a third of the meeting voted against the NTEU’s deal, despite such lies and threats, demonstrated otherwise. In reality, the NTEU is determined to prevent or shut down any industrial action at any university that could challenge its drive to impose similar sellout deals across the country.



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