

# Australian university unions divide opposition to sell-out deals

**Our correspondents**  
**18 October 2017**

Academics and professional staff at two of Sydney's public universities will take part in separate stoppages and rallies on Thursday, under conditions where university workers—and students—across Australia face escalating attacks on jobs, basic rights and conditions. This assault is being driven by the federal government's demands for further multi-billion cuts to tertiary education funding.

Members of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) at University of Technology Sydney (UTS) will strike for 24 hours, while those at Western Sydney University (WSU) will hold a four-hour stoppage. The NTEU has called both protests to try to clinch new enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs) with UTS and WSU managements.

University administrations everywhere are intent on imposing real pay cuts, sweeping job losses, further pro-market restructuring and even-greater casualisation. Increasingly, they are resorting to punitive measures, such as banning industrial action via court orders, terminating EBAs and sacking trade union representatives.

Far from opposing this offensive, the two trade unions covering university staff are facilitating it. The NTEU and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) are seeking to push through sellout EBA deals, to deliver each individual university administration the cost-cutting it requires, and to confine the outraged opposition of their members to isolated stoppages and protests.

The NTEU set the template for these sellouts last month when it bulldozed an “in-principle” EBA through a bitter union branch membership meeting at the University of Sydney. The deal is so odious that even the NTEU branch committee formally opposed it. Eventually, the NTEU national executive, which

endorsed the agreement before the members got to vote on it, obtained 301 votes in favor at the meeting. There were, nevertheless, 139 against, reflecting rising concern about the unions' role.

After that, angry CPSU members forced their union to publicly deny that it had agreed to the deal and to demand further negotiations with management. Even according to the NTEU's typically misleading “summary” of the Sydney deal:

- \* The management can impose hundreds of forced redundancies in 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.

- \* There are 2.1 percent annual wage increases, which amount to a protracted real pay cut.

At a so-called national on-line briefing on September 26, NTEU national secretary Graeme McCulloch made it plain that the union wants similar agreements at every university, including UTS and WSU. 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” they faced.

In other words, the NTEU is seeking to deliver the financial and corporate needs of managements, at the direct expense of university staff. The union has been doing exactly that for the past quarter century, ever since the regressive “enterprise bargaining” process was introduced by the Keating Labor government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions in 1993.

Since the September 26 briefing, where all debate

was blocked, the government and various university managements have only intensified their offensive. At Melbourne's Victoria University, mass retrenchments have been extended to target several NTEU branch committee members. At Perth's Murdoch University, where the administration obtained a Fair Work Commission order to terminate the EBA, the management is refusing to negotiate with the NTEU, pressuring it to extract further concessions from its members.

At UTS, the NTEU's log of claims includes "a limit on 50 percent casual teaching in any Faculty (with no increase to academic workloads for continuing staff)." This typifies the union's role over decades in helping to create conditions of massive casualisation, primarily via EBAs. In the words of the NTEU's own 2016-17 annual report, the majority of teaching at Australian universities is now performed by casual staff and "four out of five teaching-only and research-only academics [are] being employed on casual or short-term contracts."

Likewise, at WSU, the union is asking management to retain "Teaching Focused Roles and Career Development Fellowships," falsely claiming that these "have a proven track-record of stemming casualisation." In reality, the academics in these posts are subjected to huge workloads, low pay and poor conditions, while casualisation has continued to mushroom.

At WSU, both the NTEU and the CPSU are also helping management to inflict hundreds of administrative job cuts, including the retrenchment of all 41 security officers. Far from fighting job destruction, in which staff members are being forced to compete against each other to retain their own jobs, often at lower pay scales, the unions are proposing measures to stifle opposition by extending supposed "redeployment" opportunities and protecting current pay levels for limited periods.

While pushing through further retrograde EBAs, the NTEU is stepping up its promotion of the return of a Labor government as a supposed alternative to the current Liberal-National Coalition. In the union's annual report, general secretary McCulloch was explicit. He stated: "[O]nly our organised workplace power can guarantee that a future Labor government will legislate to ensure that the current power imbalance

between employers and unions is reset."

This sums up the unions' role in tying their members to the corporate agenda of the Labor Party and the entire framework of the exploitation of university staff for profit. Historically, it has been Labor governments that have spearheaded the transformation of universities into "edu-businesses," from reintroducing student fees in the 1980s to the Rudd-Gillard "education revolution," which has compelled universities to compete with each other for their "market share" of lucrative enrolments. The last NTEU and Greens-backed Labor government slashed some \$3 billion from university budgets.

At the UTS and WSU stopwork events, Socialist Equality Party supporters will call for a political rebellion against the NTEU's reactionary political and industrial agenda. We will move the following resolution:

"That this meeting opposes the NTEU sell-out at the University of Sydney and calls for a unified fight by university workers nationally against the Liberal-National government's cuts, and to overturn all the previous cuts imposed by both Labor and Coalition governments over the past four decades. We demand that billions of dollars be poured into education at all levels, from pre-school to tertiary, to guarantee the social right of all young people to a free, first-class education and the social right of all staff to decent, well-paid and secure positions."



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