

Australian unions push another sell-out agreement at Western Sydney University

Our correspondents
17 November 2017

Without bothering to consult its members, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) last week undemocratically called off all, even limited, industrial action at Western Sydney University (WSU). This is the latest in a long line of betrayals, helping managements impose further sweeping job cuts and restructuring at one university after another.

The NTEU is foisting yet another enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) on academics and other university workers with supposedly “strong outcomes” that will, in reality, only pave the way for the accelerated transformation of the country’s public universities into corporate businesses.

Despite several overwhelming votes by members for stoppages and work bans, the university’s NTEU branch officials, working closely with the NTEU national office, cancelled planned marking bans and struck an “in-principle” deal with management. The decision was made behind closed doors at the Fair Work Commission, the repressive national industrial tribunal established by the last Labor government.

The NTEU, in partnership with the other main university union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), is now trying to push through retrograde EBAs at WSU that will assist the administration to impose the deepening cuts demanded by the current Liberal-National government. Hundreds of jobs have already been destroyed at WSU in the past 12 months, including those of all the security officers. Many more will now follow.

A hastily-called and poorly-attended members’ meeting last Friday provided another revealing picture of how the NTEU, like every other trade union, functions to isolate and wear down the opposition of university workers to the endless erosion of their conditions and basic rights, and those of their students.

Under criticism by several attendees for abruptly scrapping the industrial action, NTEU branch president

David Burchell bluntly stated that he had not wanted the industrial action to go ahead. Instead, the threat of bans was intended as a means of “getting a bargain” with the management.

This declaration confirmed that the cancellation of marking bans was not a “tactical mistake” as some attendees argued, but part of a calculated manoeuvre to conclude what the NTEU had earlier termed “bargaining on the basis of mutual trust and goodwill” with the management.

What “mutual” interests? WSU, like every other university, is inflicting cuts to jobs and conditions in order to impose endless funding cuts by successive governments. The Rudd-Gillard Labor government slashed more than \$3 billion off university funding, while the Turnbull government is currently cutting another \$2.8 billion.

The NTEU’s proposed EBA is in order to partner with WSU management, inflict the cuts and thus continue the dog-eat-dog fight against other universities in the market-driven “education revolution” established by the Rudd-Gillard government, which ties all base funding to enrolments.

WSWS correspondent Mike Head, a long-time WSU academic, told the meeting: “The NTEU is following a well-rehearsed script. There have been weeks of closed-door negotiations, with members denied any right to know what is being offered to management. When I tried to get basic information about the concessions being made, I was told by the NTEU branch president I had no right to know.

“Over the years, we have seen it time and again. The unions confine us to isolated industrial action, with members divided university by university, and then strike a deal that is ‘mutually’ beneficial to the management and the union.”

Burchell and NTEU senior industrial officer Joshua

Gava provided scant information about the planned EBA, with every titbit designed to obscure the real content. They claimed a victory because some professional staff whose jobs are being abolished will be offered 20 weeks' extended redeployment possibilities and two years' salary maintenance if they are forced into lower-paid positions. These provisions are simply designed to quash opposition to the restructuring and facilitate redundancies.

Another "success" was the conversion of junior academics currently being super-exploited in Teaching Focussed Roles and on Career Development Fellowships into ongoing teaching-research roles. However, this is subject to "satisfactory performance" and "availability of work." In other words, there is no guarantee at all of employment. In at least one WSU school, academics in these posts have been threatened with pay reductions if they apply for a converted position.

In an email sent to members this week, the NTEU referred to a further clause, not mentioned at the meeting, that management can use to victimise, harass and dismiss newly-appointed academics. Management will have an extended period in which to "dismiss an academic staff member on probation," but no details were provided.

A further "strong outcome" claimed by the NTEU is the maintenance of "all current restrictions on the use of casual and fixed-term employment." This is a charade. By the union's own admission, since a previous EBA in 2012, casual employment at WSU has increased from 25 percent to 35 percent of the workforce. Other data shows that 57 percent of WSU employees are already in insecure work.

Likewise, the maintenance of "existing hours, ETFSL (student load) and marking limits on academic workloads," actually means the continued escalation of workloads as class sizes are ramped up to achieve budget cuts. "Tutorials" of 70 are now common, creating huge workloads and depriving students of meaningful class discussions.

Finally, the NTEU boasted of pay rises "ahead of the national average." In reality, the annual pay adjustments of 2 percent for the next four years amount to a real pay cut, with the official inflation rate hovering around or above 2 percent and the actual cost of living for households—such as utility, childcare, medical and housing costs—rising much faster.

Similarly regressive EBAs are being pushed through at other universities, some with even greater pay cuts. At James Cook University in northern Queensland, the NTEU national executive last week approved an EBA that

provides for a pay adjustment of just 8.6 percent over five years.

The one-hour WSU meeting was conducted in a manner that ensured less than 10 minutes was left for any debate, making genuine discussion impossible. Head moved a resolution to reject the sellout and advance an alternative socialist perspective.

The motion called 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." It further stated: "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."

Head began to explain: "Instead of being told by the NTEU what it has cooked up with management, we should be discussing what we want and need, and what our students want and need.

"What we need to be discussing here today is how to fight, in a unified struggle with our colleagues across the country, to reverse all the cuts inflicted by successive governments over the past three decades

"We need to recover what we have lost via one EBA after another—starting with permanency for all university staff, followed by tenure and protection from dismissal, reduced class sizes and workloads to permit genuine academic research, and the right of all students to free tertiary education."

Branch president Burchell then shut Head down, moving that the resolution be put without further debate. Given the lack of discussion and clarity, Head's motion was defeated, with some members abstaining. It may be weeks before members see any details of the proposed EBA, once it is finally drafted.

The author also recommend:

Australian university union blocks debate at WSU stopwork rally
[21 October 2017]



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact