

Union prepares another sellout deal at Australia's Macquarie University

Our correspondent
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Behind closed doors, under strictly-enforced secrecy, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is working with the management at Sydney's Macquarie University to prepare a new enterprise agreement (EA), which will facilitate ongoing restructuring at the expense of both staff and students.

The EA will be another national test case for the NTEU's capacity to impose on university workers the intensifying cuts and pro-business measures being dictated by universities, governments and the corporate elite.

It may be one of the first EAs drafted by the NTEU since Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's Liberal-National government announced a further \$2.2 billion cut to universities last December. A two-year government funding freeze will be followed by grants tied to "performance targets" that will align courses ever more closely to the profit and strategic needs of big business.

The secrecy imposed by the NTEU at Macquarie should be taken by all university staff as a serious warning. What the union is planning is even worse than the EAs imposed in 2011 and 2014, which gave management greater "flexibility" to casualise the workforce and introduce super-exploited academics, known as Scholarly Teaching Fellows (STFs).

The NTEU and Macquarie management have made presentations to each other, but the NTEU has refused to make its presentation available for discussion among its members. A request by a NTEU member to view the union's document, a basic right for all members, eventually resulted in permission for him to view 10 PowerPoint slides, restricted to the issue of workloads.

The union's presentation has supposedly been made on behalf of union members. But the viewing came with an extraordinary proviso that the NTEU member could not take notes and he was kept under surveillance by a union representative. The clear intention was to prevent an

accurate report of the contents to other university workers.

Nothing could more clearly reveal the NTEU's contempt for the basic democratic rights of its members, and its fear that the latter will oppose yet another retrograde EA that the union is intent on sealing with universities around the country.

The limited information contained in the presentation demonstrated that staff are desperately overworked and stressed. The NTEU has created these conditions via the "workload model" that it has enforced under previous EAs. The presentation states that this model is not broken; rather, it simply needs to be properly implemented.

Instead of calling any general meetings at Macquarie, the NTEU is holding department-by-department gatherings—organised by management—supposedly to inform members of EA bargaining developments. This approach serves to atomise the university staff and block a wider discussion. It also reveals the NTEU's extraordinarily cosy relations with management.

Keeping workers in the dark about negotiations is the modus operandi of every union in the course of every EA, in order to conceal their real contents. EAs that unions hail as "significant wins," invariably contain real wage cuts and attacks on conditions.

Previous EAs throughout the tertiary education sector have facilitated casualisation and short-term contracts—so much so that at least 40 percent of university workers nationally are now in insecure employment. The current Macquarie EA states: "[C]asual employment may legitimately be used by the University to address fluctuations in the academic and business cycle of the University."

Nor are there any meaningful restrictions on redundancies. The Macquarie EA states: "Where, as a consequence of the managing change process, it has been determined to make specific positions redundant, the University will inform affected Staff that if redeployment

is not possible they will be retrenched.”

The 2011 Macquarie EA provided for a new category of fixed-term employment, allowing academics to be appointed for short periods. It also introduced “teaching scholars” who had 80 percent of their workloads allocated to teaching.

The 2014 Macquarie EA introduced STFs, also with 80 percent teaching workloads. The NTEU claimed to be reducing the university’s number of casual hours, but the new STF positions created a further layer of lower-paid academics. In some instances, the weekly workload undertaken by an STF would require the payment of more than 60 hours for a casual staff member. Other STFs are employed on a part-time basis, but actually work more than a full-time load, in excess of 60 hours, administering courses of more than 1,500 students.

Over the past nine months, NTEU members have already witnessed two turning points nationally in the NTEU’s betrayals. The first was a new EA negotiated with Murdoch University in Western Australia after it had terminated its EA with the union.

Last week, the NTEU proclaimed the new EA, a “win for union and staff at Murdoch University.” It may be a victory for the union, but it is definitely not for the staff. According to the union’s statement: “The new streamlined agreement includes key rights and protections, and ensures that Murdoch staff are not disadvantaged compared to staff at the three other Western Australian public universities.”

No details were provided. However, the statement emphasised that “the same outcomes ... have been achieved elsewhere through earlier constructive negotiations.” In other words, Murdoch’s management has essentially achieved what it sought by terminating the old EA.

Last December, an NTEU bulletin revealed that, by mid-2017, under the old EA, 70 percent of Murdoch staff were on insecure, fixed-term or casual, contracts. The number of workers on casual contracts jumped 51 percent, from 1,542 in 2015-16 to 2,332 in 2016-17.

The second turning point was the EA that the NTEU pushed through at the University of Sydney last year. The union exploited the employer offensive at Murdoch to cajole its members into accepting a sell-out, which was so blatant that the union’s branch committee opposed it.

The University of Sydney EA, often regarded as a national pacesetter, allows forced redundancies, teaching-only positions, ongoing reliance on casuals and below-inflation pay rises. The NTEU national executive hailed it

a “breakthrough.”

While tying university workers into EAs with individual universities, to facilitate their survival efforts in the viciously competitive higher education “market,” the NTEU supports the drive to transform universities into money-making machines for Australian capitalism.

This drive has accelerated since the Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, backed by the Greens, introduced a pro-market “education revolution” that abolished block funding and compelled universities to fight each other to attract domestic and international enrolments. The NTEU welcomed the “revolution” as a “critical part of the nation building agenda.”

Academics, professional staff and students at Macquarie and other universities should link up with the striking UK lecturers, who last week rebelled against a sell-out deal struck by their union, and with university workers in similar struggles around the world, including in Sri Lanka, Kenya, Canada and the United States.

Education workers everywhere need to establish new rank-and-file organisations, independent of, and opposed to, the unions, to unify with university workers internationally against the corporate transformation of the universities and the accompanying destruction of working conditions. That means turning to a socialist perspective, aimed at the complete reorganisation of society in the interests of all, not the profits of the wealthy few.

The author also recommends:

Oppose the NTEU sellout at University of Sydney! For a unified struggle of all university workers across Australia!

[20 September 2017]

Students and staff to bear brunt of latest Australian university funding cut

[20 January 2018]

Australian university union pushes sellout deals across the country

[30 September 2017]



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