

Australian tertiary education union imposes cuts to wages and conditions at Murdoch University

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Despite immense hostility among its members, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has pushed through a new four-year agreement with Western Australia's Murdoch University. The deal cuts wages, increases workloads, facilitates retrenchments and overturns hard-won conditions.

Nearly half the university's staff abstained or refused to vote in last month's postal ballot for the NTEU-negotiated enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA). Out of around 1,700 employees, only 865 voted. Some 95 percent voted "yes," meaning 822, less than 50 percent of Murdoch staff, voted for the deal.

Earlier, at a membership meeting, the union insisted that attendees endorse the EBA without being permitted to read it. Members received only a misleading "summary" of the agreement, circulated just a few hours before the meeting, highlighting, yet again, the union's anti-democratic procedures.

This EBA goes way beyond any previous NTEU-management deal. It actually reverses a series of previously won conditions, reducing redundancy and redeployment provisions, lengthening flat-rate working hours for professional staff, making it easier to sack employees via "misconduct" charges, and slashing conditions for casual staff.

It also imposes real pay cuts by setting average annual salary rises to just over 1 percent—far below the cost of living. The following are some of the key provisions in the 63-page agreement:

- Teaching allocations for academics can be ramped up to 80 percent of their workloads, up from 75 percent in the old agreement.
- Previous time allocated for research can be scrapped for a series of vague and ill-defined reasons, including the university's "strategic

direction" or "operational, including financial, requirements."

- Professional staff hours will be lengthened by 90 minutes—from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m., to 6 a.m. to 8.30 p.m.

- Fixed-term employees must now wait at least three years, rather than two, to apply for ongoing employment. Moreover they can be refused on "reasonable business grounds."

- Maximum redundancy payments for new professional staff are reduced by 20 weeks in total, and a 26-week redeployment period for displaced professional staff has been scrapped.

- Staff members can be sacked without notice for "serious misconduct," which includes "refusing to carry out a lawful and reasonable instruction."

- Casuals are no longer entitled to a workstation and email account, only "reasonable access" to facilities that "may include" a workstation and email.

- Many rights for review, for example against denials of promotion or professional development leave, have been removed.

In addition, the EBA excludes hundreds of Murdoch's staff, dividing the workforce and creating the conditions for further attacks across the university.

A new clause removes coverage of employees engaged in "childcare, hospitality, retail, theatres, cinemas, or any other operation not primarily involving teaching and research or directly supporting these pursuits."

For staff and students, the EBA will mean larger class sizes, impossible workloads and greater exploitation of insecure fixed-term and casual teachers and other workers. Research that does not pursue the university's "strategic direction"—that is, corporate and government requirements—will increasingly be abandoned.

Murdoch management welcomed the vote "for this

simpler, modern new Agreement that delivers us all the certainty and the flexibility required to underpin our continued growth.”

In other words, the deal delivers almost exactly what management demanded last August, when it tore up its previous EBA and threatened to unilaterally slash salaries and conditions.

After Murdoch’s termination of the EBA, the union scurried back into negotiations, junking a members’ log of claims, which demanded a 15 percent pay rise and controls over increasingly onerous workloads. The NTEU’s sole concern was to preserve its role as enforcer of management demands.

This deal marks a further turning point in the NTEU’s filthy deals over EBAs. Over the past several years these have facilitated multi-billion-dollar funding cuts, transforming the country’s universities into casualised and corporatised institutions.

Last December, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced a savage further \$2.2 billion cut from university funding. Earlier legislation to inflict such cuts was met with immense anger and outrage among students, staff and parents, forcing the Senate to reject it. The government then issued its orders by decree, imposing a two-year funding freeze, followed by grants tied to “performance targets,” to align courses more closely with corporate requirements.

While the NTEU and other tertiary unions voiced “opposition” to the cuts, they are now using the Murdoch EBA to impose them through EBAs at more than a dozen universities, one by one, giving them the “flexibility” to satisfy the government’s dictates, while doing everything possible to prevent employee access to documents, suppress dissent and block any unified industrial action.

While the NTEU claims the new Murdoch EBA is a “significant victory,” it is no such thing. The mass abstention at Murdoch underscores the anger and hostility among university workers to the entire union EBA process. But it also highlights the necessity for lessons to be drawn from these bitter experiences and for the adoption of a genuine fighting strategy.

The NTEU is a “union” in name only. Like its counterparts throughout Australia and internationally, it operates as an industrial police force, carrying out the demands of corporate and financial capital that education be restructured and eventually privatised at every level, from pre-school to university. The agenda is to slash social spending and boost corporate profits. At the same time, the NTEU tries to convince its members that the election of yet another Labor government would somehow represent their interests.

NTEU national president Jennie Rea claimed in an

editorial in the latest edition of the union’s *Advocate* magazine, that she opposed “market-oriented solutions,” like the “education revolution” launched by the last Greens-backed Labor government. In fact, the NTEU had welcomed Labor’s “revolution” as a “critical part of the nation building agenda.”

University workers and school teachers around the world face similar assaults, and many have begun to fight back. Major strikes have erupted in the US, Canada, the UK, Nigeria and Sri Lanka, in some cases breaking out of the control of the unions. A factor in the NTEU’s rush to secure a deal at Murdoch is its fear that a similar rebellion is developing in Australia.

To take forward this emerging global struggle, university and school employees need to make a decisive political break from the NTEU, along with all the other education unions, and from Labor and the Greens. Independent organisations must be built that genuinely represent the interests of the working class, i.e., rank-and-file committees in every workplace, completely independent of the unions, which fight to unite all university workers and teachers around a common struggle. At the same time, these workplace committees must turn out to other sections of the working class facing the same attacks on jobs, wages and conditions.

Such a struggle requires a socialist perspective, aimed at the complete reorganisation of society in the interests of all, not the profits of the wealthy few.

Billions of dollars must be poured into public education at all levels, to 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. We urge all those who want to take forward this fight to contact the Committee for Public Education, established by the Socialist Equality Party.



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