

Australia: Discontent as union pushes collaboration with management at Macquarie University

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Because of what one participant called “a lot of concern in the room,” the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) in NSW failed to win support for a key proposal at a Macquarie University staff meeting last Tuesday. The NTEU had called the meeting to propose an agreement with the administration that could force huge teaching workloads onto at least a quarter of the university’s academics.

The discussion that erupted shed a revealing light on the new level of collaboration between the NTEU and other trade unions with management, via so-called “interest-based bargaining.” It also expressed the growing distrust in the unions throughout the entire working class.

Younger academics, those already trapped in “teaching-focused” positions, and casual teachers, in particular, voiced disbelief at the union’s assurances that a new teaching-focused classification would be voluntary. They also pointed to the onerous, super-exploited conditions they have increasingly been forced to endure.

Recounting bitter experiences, several participants spoke of becoming “saddled” with heavy teaching loads, of the university using “performance processes” to “corral” academics into such jobs, and being “shoved in and trapped” in these roles for many years.

In what was intended to be a showcase of the “gains” it had made in the course of cosy talks with senior executives, the union tried to put the best possible spin on the misleadingly titled “job families” proposal. In essence, it would push academics into a new “teaching/leadership” classification, which would allocate 80 percent of their workload to teaching.

Up until now, most academics nationally have had 40

percent of their workload set aside for research, which has long been regarded as integral to their careers, and to the universities’ role.

In an unsuccessful bid to head off these objections, the NTEU bargaining team presented the new classification as “voluntary” and declared it would “create new jobs” for casuals. These false claims failed to assuage the “concern in the room.”

In a further sign of rising discontent, academics raised questions about the real pay cut being proposed by the NTEU—rises of just 2 percent annually for the next four years, far lower than the soaring cost of living—and the wider real salary cuts being imposed on university workers nationally.

One academic pointedly asked how much the top-level university executives were receiving in pay and bonuses. The union failed to provide an answer. Instead, NTEU branch president Alison Barnes bluntly insisted that 2 percent was now “top of the range” and “you would need to take protracted industrial action to get more.”

Less than 50 people, including non-union members, attended the meeting, another sign of the disillusionment with the NTEU after decades of sellouts.

While this was the NTEU’s first report-back meeting on a proposed new four-year EBA, its state industrial officer Lance Dale admitted there had been no less than 24 days of negotiations with management, behind the backs of the members.

This was on top of days of joint “training” with top-level executives at the federal industrial tribunal. In a NTEU industrial bulletin last September, Dale reported: “The parties recently undertook three days of training

with Fair Work Commission on IBB [interest-based bargaining], and four members of the senior executive were in attendance—illustrating the importance University management has placed on this round of bargaining.”

At the meeting, Dale revealed that he and Barnes had just received a briefing by the university on the need for cost savings, because of the Turnbull Liberal-National government’s latest \$2.2 billion cuts to university funding. This underscored the entire content of the EBA and why management regarded it as so crucial.

A Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporter objected: “We don’t have to accept this. We have to fight the government’s cuts. We should demand free high-quality education for all.” He foreshadowed a motion to that effect, but Barnes, who chaired the meeting, refused to allow it to be read out. She then, in true bureaucratic fashion, ensured that time ran out before it could be debated. The resolution, which the participants were prevented from considering, stated:

“This meeting: (1) Opposes the secrecy that the NTEU has maintained around its presentation to the management.

(2) Demands full circulation to all branch members of the union’s EBA proposals.

(3) Opposes the splitting up of university workers, via individual EBAs, and calls for a unified fight by university workers nationally against the Liberal-National government’s latest multi-billion dollar cuts, and to overturn all the previous cuts imposed by both Labor and Coalition governments.

(4) Demands 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.”

Later in the meeting, an SEP supporter asked why the union had held separate department-by-department meetings, organised by management, supposedly to inform members of EBA negotiation progress. These, he said, were intended to atomise the university staff and deepen the NTEU’s collaboration with management.

He also asked why the NTEU branch’s latest industrial bulletin claimed that the EBA recently imposed at Western Australia’s Murdoch University was a “a major win for NTEU members.” It actually

cuts real pay by restricting average rises to 1 percent a year, increases workloads, facilitates retrenchments and overturns hard-won conditions.

Among the long list of conditions reversed at Murdoch is that teaching allocations for academics can be raised to 80 percent of their workloads, up from 75 percent in the previous EBA.



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