

Joint email signals union-management partnership at Australia's Macquarie University

Our correspondent
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Despite vocal discontent at a membership meeting last month, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is pushing ahead with a union-management plan to impose a new “teaching-focused” job classification and cut real wages at Sydney’s Macquarie University.

These are two of the central “strategic” goals of the “interest-based bargaining” being undertaken by the union and the management to strike an enterprise agreement (EA). The deal will enable the university to impose the cost-cutting and restructuring dictated by the federal government’s latest \$2.2 billion cuts to university funding nationally.

A joint email circulated last month by the university’s human resources director Nicole Gower and NTEU branch president Alison Barnes, announced “significant progress on the major strategic topic of academic job families.” Gower and Barnes also declared “in principle” agreement on a 2 percent annual pay rise over the four years of the proposed EA.

“Job families” is a scheme to allow management to double the teaching load, from 40 percent of workload to 80 percent, for at least a quarter of the academic staff. The 2 percent wage increases will be below the cost of living rises for family households, driven by soaring utility, transport and housing prices.

The NTEU is proceeding with these measures in spite of opposition at the one and only university-wide meeting held last month for members after many months of backroom talks. The meeting was sparsely-attended, indicating growing disgust with the role of the NTEU and other trade unions in policing decades of worsening conditions.

Younger academics, those already trapped in

“teaching-focused” positions, and casual teachers, in particular, voiced disbelief at the union’s assurances that the new “job families” classification would be voluntary. They pointed to the super-exploited conditions, including heavy teaching loads, that they have been forced to endure. There was also hostility to the cuts in real pay.

This mounting disaffection is significant. Over the past three decades, union-negotiated EAs have produced a marked deterioration in conditions for university workers, including high levels of casualisation and intolerable workloads. The unrest at Macquarie is an expression of the intensifying resistance by educators internationally, including teachers across the United States, to budget cuts, low pay and increasingly intolerable conditions.

The current bargaining process demonstrates a further shift in relations between the NTEU and management. In the past, the NTEU worked closely with university managements via “enterprise bargaining,” but told its members that the ever-worsening conditions had been forced upon it by circumstances outside its control.

As the WSWs has reported, under “interest-based bargaining” the unions work directly with management to determine their “common interests,” working intimately together to inflict the outcome on their members. At other major workplaces, wholesale restructuring, along with sweeping job and pay cuts, have been the result.

Already, the NTEU is working with managements to implement the latest federal government funding cut, which will see about 20,000 student places unfunded nationally by next year. This will be on top of multi-billion dollar cuts inflicted by the last federal Labor

government in 2012 and 2013.

At Macquarie University, teaching-focused positions were initially created through the 2011 EA, followed by the 2014 EA's introduction of 24 Scholarly Teaching Fellows (STFs). The "job families" classification of "Teaching and Leadership" positions will provide the university with a much larger pool of teaching-only positions.

A traditional academic workload has been 40 percent research, 40 percent teaching and 20 percent administration. An 80 percent teaching load means more than a doubling of teaching hours. Additional teaching duties, such as tutorials and marking, are weighted so that an academic can be allocated many extra hours, creating the conditions of a teaching factory.

The NTEU-UWS joint email on April 28 celebrated the alliance between the union and management, with "both parties speaking positively about the experience." The email also thanked Fair Work Commission (FWC) deputy president Anna Booth, a former union boss, for "her involvement and guidance in this new method" of deal-making.

The FWC, established by the last Labor government, has helped impose huge cuts to pay and conditions in other industries, including printing and transport, and this year banned a stoppage by New South Wales rail workers.

Gower and Barnes stated: "The principles of interest-based bargaining have also guided the provisions on implementation of the agreement, staff consultation and engagement." This points to the establishment of mechanisms for ongoing collaboration between the NTEU and the management, at every level, to enforce the EA and monitor and suppress any opposition to its implementation.

Speaking as true partners, Gower and Barnes said: "We intend to provide further briefings for academic staff in the coming months to provide more detail on these matters—please keep an eye out for an invitation to your faculty/department session."

This means another series of joint meetings convened by the union and department heads, which serve only to divide staff members into departmental groups and intimidate opposition through the presence of departmental chiefs.

The email misleadingly asserted that workers "will

have the opportunity to vote on any new proposed agreement." In reality, the union and management intend to present their EA as an accomplished fact and will do everything in their power to prevent any rank and file rebellion.

Important lessons need to be drawn from the struggles of teachers in the US and lecturers in Britain, who have undertaken historic strike action this year, only to see their unions agree to essentially the same conditions their members had rejected.

To take forward the fight against ever-accelerating corporate restructuring, academics and university staff must break with the NTEU and organise rank and file committees, completely independent of the unions, and turn out to students and other sections of the working class facing similar attacks.

To sustain and develop such a struggle requires an alternative, socialist perspective, one that rejects the subordination of education to the requirements of the corporate and financial elites. A workers' government would pour billions of dollars into education at all levels, from day-care to post-graduate study, 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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