

# Union tries to contain staff anger at Australia's University of Newcastle

John Harris  
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Despite reporting an “overwhelming” vote for industrial action by staff in a recent ballot at the University of Newcastle, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is limiting the action in order to strike yet another regressive enterprise agreement with management.

From July 4, the NTEU will ask its members to commence what it described in a June 27 press release as “three ‘low level’ industrial actions”:

1. A ban on participation in the staff appraisal process;
2. A ban on responding to management enquiries outside 9am-5pm weekdays; and
3. Making statements explaining why the Union is taking industrial action in communications with any person whilst working.

These minor work bans are aimed at containing as much as possible any significant struggle by workers and students against the university's cost-cutting, and the underlying multi-billion dollar budget cuts imposed by successive Liberal-National and Labor governments. The “actions” are timed for when the vast majority of students are on semester break.

The union said the industrial action had been called because the “reasonable claims from the NTEU are yet to be progressed satisfactorily” in protracted negotiations with management. These “reasonable” claims remain vague, and no pay rise figure has yet been nominated.

A June 27 “snapshot” circulated by the NTEU spoke of ensuring “that members are no worse off” under a new agreement, obtaining limited improvements for casual teachers and seeking 30 new ongoing STF (Scholarly Teaching Fellows) positions. These STF roles are low-cost, high-teaching load positions that the NTEU has helped introduce over the past decade.

The very word “reasonable” is in line with the long record of the NTEU in striking deals with universities to assist them to enforce cost-cutting and restructuring.

As it has done for decades, the NTEU is isolating the struggles of its members, university by university, across Australia against deepening attacks on their conditions and pay. It uses the enterprise bargaining process to work with individual managements to find means to impose on its members the impact of intensifying funding cuts.

A recent NTEU industrial bulletin, issued at Sydney's Macquarie University, reported “pitched battles” across the sector, with staff opposing attacks on their conditions and pay, including at the University of Newcastle (UoN), the University of New South Wales and the University of New England. Utterly opposed to any unified struggle against the budget cuts, the NTEU is seeking to contain these “battles.”

Without mentioning any attendance figures, the NTEU reported that members at UoN “unanimously voted” at a meeting for the work bans. Previously, the union said there was an “overwhelming” ballot vote for a range of industrial actions, but provided no voting results.

The union said the decision to take industrial action followed talks between the NTEU and management “over many months (and some 25 EB [enterprise bargaining] meetings) to press negotiations on the new agreements to cover staff for the next three years.”

In other words, there have been intensive backroom talks on how to satisfy management's demands.

In an email circulated to staff on April 23, management directly linked its agenda to those being enforced at “other universities” following the latest \$2.2 billion cut announced by the Turnbull Liberal-National government last December. UoN reportedly stands to lose approximately \$105 million by 2027 as part of this austerity program.

The email said the enterprise agreement had to take into account “the financial outlook for the higher education sector” and “the longer term financial sustainability of the University.”

The Turnbull government's cuts intensify the pressure on universities since the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government siphoned \$2.7 billion out of tertiary education in 2013.

Statistics compiled by the Department of Education and Training revealed that at UoN, over 30 percent of staff were in casual or part-time insecure work in 2017, up from approximately 20 percent in 1997.

In November 2016, a restructure at UoN threatened 10 percent of the 1,700 full-time and casual professional staff. In May last year, 30 administration positions went in the first round of redundancies with "more expected to come," according to NTEU branch president Tom Griffiths.

UoN's 2017 annual report stated that the university had realised a surplus of \$54.7 million. NTEU branch organiser Jenny Whittard stated that between 2012 and 2017, the university accumulated surpluses of \$336 million, \$400 million in cash and investments and a "record salary growth for senior management."

These developments, however, flow directly from the "education revolution" launched by the last Labor government a decade ago with the backing of the NTEU. While lifting caps on enrolments, this regime has forced universities to compete against each other for survival by recruiting students, both domestic and international, and attracting corporate sponsorship.

As a result, while still nominally public, the universities have been increasingly transformed into corporate entities, spending millions on advertising and executive salaries. This has been at the expense of staff and students alike, who face larger class sizes, worse staff-student ratios and increased casualisation of teachers.

Enterprise agreements are aimed at pitting universities against one another in the quest for lucrative markets and investment. UoN alone has invested \$1 million in a major marketing campaign. The *Newcastle Herald* reported last August that 9 full-time positions had opened in its marketing and communications division, including 5 new senior staff on enterprise agreement-mandated salaries of \$118,548 per year.

The entire university system has become heavily dependent on full-fee-paying international students. According to a fiscal report released last December, international students account for \$19.1 billion of annual tertiary education sector revenue. Statistics from StudyMove.com revealed that international students are plagued with exorbitant tuition fees, averaging \$29,235 per year for undergraduate courses in 2017.

NTEU officials nervously watched the wave of wildcat strikes by teachers in the United States earlier this year, the strike of 50,000 lecturers in Britain and the struggles that erupted among university workers in many other countries. Union officials are acutely sensitive to the anger among workers at the ongoing deterioration of the education sector and are seeking to direct a growing movement of workers behind the re-election of yet another pro-business Labor government.

At recent union meetings at UoN, NTEU industrial organiser Lance Dale said the enterprise agreement campaign was all about building support for the Australian Council of Trade Unions' "change the rules campaign," which is promoting Labor's return to office.

On June 19, staff at Macquarie University voted in favour of two resolutions moved by Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) supporters. One resolution opposed the splitting up of university employees, via individual enterprise agreements, and called for a unified national struggle by university workers to overturn the budget cuts inflicted by successive governments. The other called for vastly increased education funding, at all levels, "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 permanent positions."

These resolutions provide a perspective for all university staff. They indicate the emergence of significant opposition to the decades-long betrayals of the trade unions and their suppression of any unified struggle against the attacks on jobs and working conditions implemented by both Labor and Liberal-National governments.

*The author also recommends:*

Staff at Australia's Macquarie University vote for unified fight against government cuts  
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