

Australia: Reject NTEU sellout at Macquarie University! For a unified national struggle against cuts!

The Committee For Public Education
13 September 2018

Despite widespread opposition among staff to far-reaching changes to employment conditions, and an effective real wage cut, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has struck a deal with management at Sydney's Macquarie University on a new Enterprise Agreement covering academic staff.

With only three days' notice, the union called a meeting for Friday for members to endorse the agreement, giving them no time to carefully read, discuss and debate it. The rush for a vote on the document is a warning of its thrust and content.

The meeting has been called on the very last day of teaching prior to a two-week break. This demonstrates the complete contempt of the NTEU for the democratic rights of its members, significant numbers of whom will be unable to participate.

NTEU branch president Alison Barnes sent an email less than 48 hours before the meeting providing a link to the proposed agreement, which the university management had made available online. The almost 100-page document outlines a sweeping restructuring of working conditions, plus below-inflation annual pay rises of only 2 percent through until 2021.

Barnes said the union's bargaining team was "proud" to have negotiated a deal that "contains a number of sector-leading conditions." This must sound alarm bells for every NTEU member. In reality, the proposed agreement will set a national precedent for a new assault on the basic conditions of academics and other university workers.

Barnes has been recently elevated, unopposed, to the position of NTEU national president. She has used the year-long, closed-door negotiations at Macquarie to pioneer an "interest-based bargaining" (IBB) program, which is explicitly based on the supposed common interests of employers and workers.

In reality, IBB makes plain the mutual interests of union bureaucrats and corporate managements against those of workers. IBB has been used in major workplaces, such as the Murdoch media printing plants, to suppress the opposition of workers to the wholesale destruction of jobs and basic conditions.

Instead of discussing what the management and the NTEU are jointly seeking to inflict on educators, Friday's meeting should discuss what university workers and students want, such as smaller classes, decent-paying full-time jobs for all university staff, and the reversal of the billions of dollars in cuts imposed by successive Labor and Liberal-National governments.

The centrepiece of the proposed agreement is the introduction of "job families." This scheme would allow the university to place 25 percent of its full-time academic staff in "teaching and leadership" positions that require up to 70 percent teaching workloads, leaving no time for research, or "technical" posts that could involve even heavier teaching loads. This is a fundamental reversal of the traditional academic role, which allocated 40 percent of workload time to research.

In a document supposedly summarising the agreement's "gains," the NTEU falsely claimed that the new positions would be "voluntary." In reality, academics, especially junior ones, will be pressured into the new roles in the hope of eventually securing promotion.

The NTEU's "gains" document also touts the new teaching-focussed classifications as "a decasualisation strategy." What a fraud! The agreement itself specifies that only a handful of casuals can apply for these roles, "subject to a competitive, merit-based selection process."

Like every other NTEU agreement over the past three decades, this one will only facilitate further casualisation. Already, 46 percent of the academic workforce across the

country is in insecure forms of employment.

The NTEU “gains” document also claims that all staff would have equitable access to Outside Studies Programs (OSP), formerly known as sabbatical, and promotion processes. The agreement specifies that OSP will be available to “Research Active” staff—a requirement that will be practically impossible for teaching-focussed staff.

In her email, Barnes said the negotiations were “driven by your feedback throughout the process.” The truth is that the union has ridden roughshod over the concerns voiced by members at previous meetings.

The union’s contempt for its members was most clearly shown in its suppression of any information or discussion on the resolutions passed at a June 19 meeting, moved by supporters of the Committee to Defend Public Education and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP).

The motions called for a unified national struggle of all university staff to overturn all the government cuts, including the \$3 billion slashed by the previous Greens-backed Labor government, and a fight for vastly increased education funding, at all levels, to guarantee the basic social right to free, first-class education for all students, and full-time jobs for all university workers.

The NTEU has failed to circulate these vital resolutions at Macquarie or any other university, let alone initiate a fight for them.

Absolutely opposed to any such struggle, the NTEU is intent on pushing through regressive agreements at individual universities, currently including Newcastle and Melbourne, to assist each one to impose the cuts, at the expense of staff and students alike.

Thus, at another staff meeting, Barnes flatly insisted that 2 percent, which is a real wage cut, was now “top of the range” and nothing more could be obtained. This follows from agreements rammed through by the NTEU at many universities in the past 12 months, where pay rises have fallen well short of cost of living increases.

The union’s hostility toward the basic rights and interests of its members has been on display at other recent meetings at Macquarie.

NTEU industrial officer Lance Dale told members of two departments that the union was not prepared to fight the onerous workload model being implemented at the department level. Instead, he said, “it would be fixed with the new agreement.” In fact, the proposed agreement allows for new versions of “faculty workload models” to be inflicted on staff.

When concerns were raised at the meeting about the elevation of a senior member of staff who has a history of

overloading others with teaching, Dale’s response was “if you don’t like it, you can leave.” This simply underscores the NTEU’s partnership with management.

Most of the “gains” hailed by the NTEU consist of closer involvement of union representatives in implementation committees. To facilitate this, there would be “an additional 2 days” for members to “attend group-based training organised by NTEU.”

Such “training” is another essential feature of “interest-based bargaining,” which inserts union reps at every level to police union-negotiated agreements and assist management to combat resistance to their implementation.

In other words, from the union’s perspective the proposed agreement is a win because it enshrines the complete incorporation of the union into the process of enforcing the slashing of staff pay and conditions.

The first step forward against this offensive is to vote down the NTEU’s deal. To fight for decent, well paid and secure positions for all university staff, there has to be a break from the NTEU and the formation of completely independent rank and file committees, to link up with workers throughout the country and internationally who are facing similar battles against the agenda of big business and its parliamentary servants.

To develop and sustain such a struggle requires an alternative, socialist perspective, based on the complete reorganisation of society in the interests of all, instead of the wealthy elite. All those who want to take forward this fight should contact the Committee For Public Education, established by the SEP.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact