

Australia: Union calls one-day stoppage at University of Newcastle

John Harris

14 September 2018

After weeks of limited work bans, and a half-day stoppage last month, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has called a one-day strike at the University of Newcastle (UON) this Monday in a bid to secure a new enterprise agreement with management.

A NTEU meeting on September 5 voted unanimously for the stoppage—a measure of the determination of university workers everywhere to fight the deepening destruction of job security, ongoing corporate restructuring, stagnating wages and casualisation.

There are hopes among some academics and other staff members that the strike means that the union is finally taking up a struggle against the destruction of jobs and conditions, after a series of restructures in 2016 and 2017 that eliminated the positions of hundreds of staff members.

An academic who wished to remain anonymous told the WSWS: “I support the strike because I feel that there has to be a fight taken up against management who would like to impose conditions where they can sack anybody for ‘misbehaviour’... All our jobs are at risk, it is the broadest term that can be used to target anybody that they have an issue with.”

In reality, as at every other public university around the country, the NTEU is anxiously seeking to seal another three-year deal with management, not fight against it. On September 10, NTEU Newcastle branch president Tom Griffiths said there had been “intensive bargaining over the past two weeks” and that the “NTEU is continuing good faith efforts to reach an agreement.”

The essential purpose of an agreement would be to help the university impose its share of the punishing funding cuts, totalling more than \$5 billion, inflicted on the tertiary sector by successive Labor and Liberal-National governments since 2012.

After more than a year of intensive closed-door talks with management, in early August, the union threatened industrial action if three items were not resolved by the end of August:

1. Maintaining existing consultative processes for managing organisation change;
2. Maintaining committee structures for disciplinary processes;
3. Providing real pathways for staff locked into casual and contract employment to apply for conversion into more secure work.

Thus, the NTEU’s demands centre on maintaining the “consultative” and “committee” structures through which it has collaborated with management in implementing restructuring and job cuts. This typifies the union’s partnership with individual universities nationally, via the enterprise agreement process, in facilitating the transformation of universities into increasingly casualised corporate entities.

The reference to seeking pathways for security for casual and contract staff is a fraud. The NTEU’s demands are extremely minimal, and will do nothing to halt the underlying casualisation process.

The union is seeking “15 new education-focussed jobs phased in at five ongoing positions per year” and “a broadening of the right to apply for conversion for fixed term/contract staff, such that three years of satisfactory service is deemed equivalent to an initial merit-based selection process, opening the possibility to apply for conversion to continuing employment.” This guarantees nothing for casual and contract workers.

Previous NTEU agreements at UON have facilitated casualisation to such a degree that, by the union’s own admission, “two in three jobs at UON are casual or contract.”

The picture is similar nationally. A report released

last month by Paul Kniest, the NTEU's policy and research coordinator, noted that in 2016–17, Australian universities “employed a total of 213,378 employees,” only 35.6 percent of whom had full-time employment.

Like other unions, the NTEU has utilised enterprise agreements to contain and isolate the struggles of workers, preventing a broad mobilisation of the working class against the corporate assault on jobs, wages and basic conditions.

At an August 29 meeting, one staff member pointed out that what is taking place at Newcastle is happening in every other university. Lance Dale, the union's state New South industrial officer, quickly clamped down on any perspective of a unified struggle, declaring that the “most effective campaign will be one that is done locally.”

An NTEU meeting on June 19 at Sydney's Macquarie University, which Dale attended, voted for resolutions tabled by supporters of the Committee For Public Education (CFPE) and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) that opposed the splitting up of university employees, via individual enterprise agreements. It called for a unified national struggle by university workers to overturn the budget cuts inflicted by successive governments.

The resolutions 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.”

The NTEU has displayed its hostility to these vital resolutions by not circulating them at Macquarie or other universities. Another staff member told the WSWS: “I have heard barely anything about this. If the union was serious about organising opposition to these attacks, then they would be trying to get as many people as possible onto this campaign.”

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At Newcastle, staff have not had a wage increase since April 2017 when the former agreement expired. The university has offered four increases of 1.9 percent per annum, which is a real pay cut. The NTEU has no real difference with that. The union said on September 10 it was “continuing to push for annual increases of 2.1 percent,” which “will likely barely hold pace with the Consumer Price Index (CPI).”

This year, struggles by education workers have broken out internationally, with strikes by teachers and university workers in the United States, New Zealand, Britain, Canada, Sri Lanka and elsewhere, almost always in defiance of union betrayals.

In Australia, the NTEU and other unions are trying to divert the mounting discontent of workers behind the return of another pro-business Labor government via the bogus “change the rules” campaign. At the same time, they are trying to keep workers straitjacketed within the existing anti-strike “rules”—introduced by the last Labor government—through enterprise agreements.

The Rudd-Gillard Labor government, supported by the Greens and the NTEU, also initiated the “education revolution” a decade ago. While lifting caps on student enrolments, this regime has forced universities to compete against each other for survival by recruiting fee-paying students, both domestic and international, and attracting corporate sponsorship.

As a result, the universities have been 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 and worse staff-student ratios.

To overturn this process and fight for the basic rights of staff and students, university workers have to break with the pro-capitalist NTEU and Labor Party, and form completely independent rank-and-file committees, and turn out to workers throughout the country and internationally who are facing similar struggles 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.



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