

# Australian academics union tries to impose another sellout agreement at University of Melbourne

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The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has recommended a new enterprise agreement for academic and professional staff at the University of Melbourne that involves a real wage cut and paves the way for further layoffs and increases to staff workloads.

The agreement was ratified by an NTEU sub-branch meeting on August 23. The union then called a “celebration,” in order to present the deal with the management as a *fait accompli* even before a ballot of all staff members.

Over the past year, the NTEU has pushed through real wage cuts and multiple regressive agreements covering different university campuses across Australia, including Murdoch University in Western Australia.

Via the enterprise agreement process, the union has repeatedly demonstrated its role in assisting the ongoing “free market” restructuring of tertiary education and in working closely with university managements against the interests of academics and other professional staff.

This process divides university workers, institution by institution, and helps each individual management impose the burden of the billions of dollars in cuts inflicted by successive Labor and Liberal-National Coalition governments since 2013. The universities are being transformed into corporatised entities, serving the needs of the financial elite, at the expense of the working conditions and pay levels of staff.

At the University of Melbourne, only around 1,500 of the university’s 13,600 employees are members of the NTEU, reflecting widespread disaffection with the union, as well as the casualisation of the workforce. The *Age* last month reported that 27 of Australia’s 42

universities now have more than 40 percent of all staff on casual contracts. This does not include staff on fixed-term contracts; those with a secure, ongoing position are now in the minority in most Australian campuses.

University of Melbourne staff staged a four-hour strike last May, which the NTEU diverted behind the Australian Council of Trades Union’s bogus “Change the Rules” campaign that is aimed at promoting the Labor Party in the upcoming federal election. Another five-hour strike had been planned for August 14, as well as a boycott and protest of the university’s Open Day on August 19. However these limited actions were called off on August 10 after the NTEU announced that an in-principle agreement had been reached with the management.

The NTEU is promoting the agreement on the grounds that the management withdrew previous demands to strip references to academic freedom from the agreement and to split academic and professional staff between two separate industrial agreements. The union also claimed a small number of “achievements” that mostly comprised empty verbal commitments by the university on staffing and workload. Another “achievement” was an increase in employer superannuation contribution to 17 percent of salary for ongoing staff—but this will only begin at the end of the agreement, i.e. in 51 months’ time.

On virtually every substantive issue concerning staff wages and working conditions, the NTEU made significant concessions in line with the management’s requirements. The deal involves a nominal annual wage rise of just 2.1 percent, an effective pay cut for the next four years, given rising costs of living.

The NTEU’s own summary of the agreement admits

to an additional 12 different “concessions.” Several of these relate to workload: there is no inclusion of staff to student ratios, with the union claiming that ratios were “mostly unenforceable and historically ineffective in monitoring workloads.” Having failed to stem worsening ratios and workloads, the NTEU is now opening the door for even worse conditions, affecting both staff and students. Another concession affects the ability of staff to work flexible hours.

Several of the acknowledged concessions are aimed at expanding the university’s ability to impose layoffs.

A new clause allows “management to direct an employee to leave work in circumstances where there is a reasonable concern about the employee’s health or wellbeing.” This creates the conditions for victimisation of staff on alleged mental or physical health grounds. A new clause allows sackings for unauthorised absences of more than 40 days.

Another concession concerns “management of unsatisfactory work performance and misconduct [and] grievance and disputes procedure.” This places the fate of a staff member accused of misconduct or unsatisfactory performance in the hands of a “disputes committee,” with clauses removed that previously permitted an appeal to the Fair Work Commission industrial tribunal.

After the NTEU’s declaration of an in-principle agreement, one university staff member identified only as Allan, responded online: “[T]he timings [sic] for management agreeing is interesting given a large number of major changes and redundancies are planned between now and end of 2018.

“By signing on the dotted line the Union gives away its protected industrial action abilities which means when the proverbial hits the fan the NTEU membership cannot take any further action to shield workers. The University wants this settled because it’s larger and more important agenda is to ‘clean house’ before the new Vice Chancellor officially takes over. There’s a whole heap of pain yet to come for staff in the next 5–6 months...”

The NTEU did not respond to the post. The union will bear direct responsibility for any sackings organised by university management.

Universities have been restructured over the past three decades along business lines, with damaging effects on academics and students alike. Just days after

the NTEU struck the University of Melbourne deal, an article published in the Fairfax press revealed that the average annual salary for university vice-chancellors in Victoria and New South Wales has risen to over \$1 million.

The University of Melbourne’s defence of its vice-chancellor’s salary underscored the extent to which universities have been transformed into corporate entities. “The university is an ASX100 [stock exchange] equivalent organisation, with an operating budget of over \$2.5 billion (and) is Victoria’s third-largest employer, and single largest export earner,” a spokesperson explained.

University workers at the University of Melbourne and across Australia need to organise an independent fight for decent full-time and secure jobs, wages and conditions for all staff, and for the basic social right for students to a properly funded and free public education system at all levels, including tertiary education.

This requires a break with the NTEU and the formation of action committees on every campus, uniting academics, professional staff, and students and turning out to other sections of the working class confronting similar attacks. Those who want to take forward this fight should contact the Committee For Public Education.



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