

Australian university union in backroom talks to slash jobs and conditions amid COVID-19 pandemic

Mike Head
14 April 2020

In response to the federal government's latest refusal to financially rescue Australia's coronavirus-hit public universities, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has stepped up negotiations with the employers to inflict the disaster's devastating burden on university workers.

NTEU members were stunned and outraged last Wednesday to receive an email from the union's general secretary Matthew McGowan announcing that it was in discussions, behind their backs, with "Vice Chancellors, Universities Australia, and the Australian Higher Education Industrial Association" (the employers' body) about undisclosed "measures" that "we would never normally consider."

To "relieve financial pressure on institutions," this "may include deferral of pay rises, providing the ability to direct taking of leave, or other cost-saving measures." The negotiations were "happening quickly and cooperatively," McGowan said.

As an indication of members' fury, a NTEU branch meeting at Sydney University last Thursday voted by 117 to 2 to censure the NTEU national executive for "commencing negotiations on significant concessions."

While McGowan depicted the closed-door talks as a move to "protect jobs," the email only said "job cuts" would be a "last resort." In reality, the deals being struck by the union will assist the managements to eliminate thousands of full-time and casual jobs.

Universities Australia chairperson Deborah Terry declared on Sunday that an estimated 21,000 jobs would go in the next six months. Terry said a government "relief" package announced that day would "be nowhere near enough" to cover a revenue decline of up to \$4.6 billion this year.

Universities already have begun shutting down courses,

while exploiting the shift to on-line teaching in order to enlarge classes, expand workloads and slash jobs. The hardest hit are the approximately 90,000 casual staff who do much of the teaching, research and administrative support work on the campuses.

After voicing "disappointment" at the government's package, NTEU national president Alison Barnes immediately indicated that the union would "continue its discussions with employers."

While the mass graves, overrun hospitals and other horrors of the pandemic internationally have laid bare the underlying rot and failure of capitalism, so it has exposed the role of the trade unions, which are everywhere helping to try to bail out the ruling elite at the expense of the lives and livelihoods of workers.

As ACTU secretary Sally McManus declared on national television last week, the unions are telling employers "you can get everything you want through co-operation." This includes cutting the working hours, wage penalty rates and leave entitlements of millions of workers.

The NTEU's response is not an aberration but an escalation of its record of collaboration with university managements. The union just recently completed a national round of enterprise agreements with individual universities, each tailored to satisfying their cost-cutting requirements. Now, it is rushing to tear up any provisions in these agreements that stand in the way of a much deeper assault on jobs and conditions.

University workers face a political fight against the corporate elite and all its political servants. The Liberal-National government's supposed "relief" package, unveiled last Sunday by Education Minister Dan Tehan, provides the universities nothing to cover their heavy losses, overwhelmingly caused by dramatic falls in fee

revenue from international students, especially from China.

Instead, the government will simply maintain its \$18 billion funding for domestic students this year. It will pressure the universities to try to make up some of their near \$5 billion shortfall by competing with profit-driven private providers to produce and sell 20,000 six-month online vocational courses.

Tehan said these new courses would be in “nursing, teaching, counselling, allied health or other areas considered national priorities.” He did not explain how nurses or teachers, for example, could be trained in six months.

The package is blatantly designed to force universities to reduce their reliance on Chinese and other international students, while further transforming them into vocational training colleges directly serving the interests of the government and big business.

“These reforms will help universities pivot towards a closer alignment of domestic industry and student demands through innovative micro-credentials delivered flexibly online,” he stated.

This is anathema to the very concept of universities as institutions of higher learning and critical inquiry, enabling people to develop deeper understanding of history, society, the earth’s environment and the universe.

Over the past decade since the global financial crisis, cuts exceeding \$7 billion, initiated by the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government and intensified by the Coalition, have driven universities to exploit international students as cash cows, charging them up to \$30,000 a year in fees. By 2018, these fees made up 26 percent of total university revenues, and much more at some universities.

Throughout this assault, the NTEU has kept staff members straitjacketed by union-negotiated enterprise agreements, which have prevented a unified fight back.

Now, in line with the reactionary nationalist response of governments around the world to the pandemic, Prime Minister Scott Morrison has told international students to “go home.” Most have lost their part-time jobs and many are now destitute, relying on university-provided food vouchers, but the government has refused to assist them.

As a result, thousands of students will no longer be able to continue their courses, even if they remain in the country, trapped by travel restrictions. Many thousands more will no longer enrol in Australian universities.

In response, university workers must reject the regressive measures being proposed by the NTEU. The crisis provoked by COVID-19 cannot be resolved by just

censuring the union, however. It shows the necessity for university workers to break from the NTEU entirely and build new rank-and-file organisations based on a fight against the corporate profit-driven capitalist system itself.

All the resources exist to fund first-class universities providing free education to all, but this wealth is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few. The fortunes accumulated by Australia’s 250 wealthiest people soared to \$377.77 billion last year, according to the recent Australian Rich List published by the *Australian*.

While crippling the universities, governments are handing billions more dollars to the corporate elite via bailout packages, and spending hundreds of billions more on military hardware. Instead, resources must be urgently poured into healthcare to protect the population from the pandemic as well as into other essential social services, including education and research, and providing full income support for all those thrown out of work.

Of course, that is incompatible with the wealthy elite’s monopoly grip over society. What is required therefore is the fight for workers’ governments based on a socialist program, aimed at the complete reorganisation of society in the interests of all, not private profit.

Workers’ governments would expropriate the major banks and corporate giants—including the private education conglomerates—and place them under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class. We urge all educators who want to discuss this socialist perspective to contact the Socialist Equality Party and its Committee for Public Education.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact