

Outrage among Australian university workers over secret NTEU pay cut talks

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Anger is rising among academics and other education workers across Australia over secret talks initiated by the National Tertiary Education (NTEU) with employers to cut jobs, wages and conditions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The alarm among university staff was heightened last Friday when the *Guardian* reported the text of some of the resolutions adopted by the NTEU national executive on April 3 to “commence a national level negotiation” with the university managements.

The national executive resolved that “concessions may be made,” including “concessions on pay,” which could include a pay freeze, deferral of increments, or “in extreme circumstances, temporary general reductions in Agreement rates.”

Fearing a revolt by its members over this pay-cutting plan, the NTEU executive said the resolutions must be kept internal, or for “confidential, limited sharing.”

Even before this damning news was published, opposition had erupted to the NTEU’s email announcement, delayed until April 8, informing members that it was already conducting such talks “quickly and cooperatively.”

That email declared that, without any authorisation by members, the union was offering the employers “measures” that “we would never normally consider.” But that email covered up the true extent of the concessions the NTEU is offering, in particular the pay cuts.

Amid the furious response to the email, a meeting of NTEU members at the University of Sydney voted 117 to 2 to “censure” the national executive for “commencing negotiations on significant concessions.” NTEU branch committees at the University of Melbourne, RMIT, Flinders University and Victoria University adopted similar resolutions.

Guardian report, it ~~As~~tenow even the clearer while claiming to be trying to “save jobs,” the NTEU is paving the way for an historic reversal of university workers' conditions, as well as for the destruction of thousands of more jobs on top of the thousands already lost, especially casuals.

The union’s cynical cover-up of its plans was on display last Thursday, the day before the *Guardian* report. About 600 mostly outraged NTEU members participated in a New South Wales statewide online meeting, only to find they were barred from speaking or moving motions to oppose the union’s plans.

Members of the NTEU national executive ran the “webinar” but made no mention of pay cuts. Instead, they said the NTEU was “seeking salary-related cost saving measures, including reduction of leave balances and fractional reductions in employment.”

Giving the opening report, NTEU state secretary Michael Thomson, who is a member of the national executive, defended entering the talks behind the backs of union members. “We do this all the time,” he said, referring to negotiations with university managements.

Thomson’s remark unwittingly revealed that the NTEU sellout being prepared is not an aberration, but a continuation, in a more naked form, of what it has done for decades. The NTEU has a long record of drawing up enterprise agreements with managements that have allowed the universities to substantially casualise their workforces and carry out frequent “restructuring” cuts to jobs.

This flows from the whole perspective of trade unionism, which is to tie workers to the profit-making requirements of their employers. The same hand-in-glove relationship with business was articulated by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus when vowed on “Insiders,” a national

television program, on April 5 that the unions would give employers “everything you want” in response to the pandemic.

Thomson claimed that “we haven’t reached any agreement” with management. He said members could vote on any deals during branch meetings at individual universities. But the union’s clear intent is to foist a “national framework” on university workers as a fait accompli.

Despite the “webinar” format, a barrage of comments in the “chat” field showed widespread hostility to the discussions the NTEU is conducting. Among the responses were: “Concessions never save jobs. History has shown this,” “Why are you blocking debate at this meeting?” “Why can’t we move resolutions opposing what the union is doing?” and “Why has the union gone behind our backs to go into these talks?”

In an attempt to defend the unauthorised negotiations, Damien Cahill, another NTEU national executive member, told the webinar that the university managements “can do whatever they want” and “have enormous prerogative at the moment under the Fair Work Act.” He argued that the union therefore had no choice but to seek deals with the managements.

Yet the universities only have a virtual free hand to impose job cuts because of the NTEU’s enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs), which allow redundancies for “operational reasons.”

Cahill also warned against “illegal” industrial action by NTEU members to fight cuts to jobs and conditions. Such action is only illegal because the Fair Work Act bans industrial action, except during EBA negotiating periods. All the unions, including the NTEU, supported the introduction of that legislation by the last Labor Party government.

In response to the chat condemnations, the NTEU officials insisted that “we are not selling out, we are protecting jobs.” Yet they admitted that tens of thousands of casuals have already lost their employment and other staff members are being forced to take part-time, fractional jobs.

The COVID-19 crisis has brought to a devastating new level the chronic government under-funding of universities. Primarily because of the loss of full fee-paying international students, total university incomes this year are expected to fall by up to \$5 billion.

The current Liberal-National government’s refusal to

rescue the universities comes on top of the \$7 billion cut by successive governments over the past decade, starting with the minority Gillard Labor government, kept in power by the Greens.

This poses the necessity for a political struggle against the capitalist ruling elite itself. Members of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the Socialist Equality Party contributed to the chat discussion at Thursday’s webinar, seeking to expose the role of the NTEU and advocating an alternative socialist perspective.

CFPE members posed questions such as: “Why have your EBAs allowed managements to destroy so many jobs? Why are you trying to impose a ‘national framework’ on us? Why not demand the diversion of funds from the wealthy or military spending to fund universities?” Not one of these questions was answered.

By contrast, supporters of pseudo-left groups promoted the illusion that the same union that was pursuing this monumental betrayal could be pressured into leading a fight against the universities and the government. They posted links to a petition that declares: “We deserve better—and if our union fights we can win it.”

The petition advises the union: “If we want to maintain and grow the membership, the NTEU cannot be seen to be bargaining away our pay and conditions, it has to fight for them.”

In chat comments, CFPE members posed the obvious question: “Why ask this same national executive to lead a struggle?” They also posted links to the CFPE Facebook site and a WSWS article denouncing the NTEU’s backroom talks.

As that article explains, the crisis provoked by COVID-19 has exposed the true pro-management nature of the NTEU. 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 profit-driven capitalist system itself.



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