

Australian university union continues sellout talks despite members' anger

Our correspondents
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Defying outrage by university workers, condemnations by casuals' networks and censures by campus branch meetings, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is continuing backroom talks with employers to impose historic concessions, including outright pay cuts.

Anger is deepening, because the union's pretence of "protecting jobs" via a "national framework" to respond to the COVID-19 crisis has already been torn to shreds. University managements are simply taking advantage of the talks to continue inflicting massive job cuts.

While the NTEU readily offers sacrifices of pay and conditions, and opposes any action whatsoever to fight back, the employers are stepping up their attacks.

By the NTEU's own admission, in a resolution bulldozed through a union national council meeting last Friday, "some universities have indeed commenced" measures such as forced redundancies "on a wide scale," non-renewal of job contracts, termination of casuals, stand downs, increased class sizes and teaching loads, course and campus closures and coerced leave or shifts to part-time work.

The NTEU resolution effectively gives the employers a green light. It permits them "to implement some cost-saving measures," even deferral of pay rises, deferral of increments, deferral of promotion or reclassification increases, limited fraction reductions, limited annual leave and LSL [long service leave] direction, and direction to work other duties."

Supposedly in return, the NTEU is seeking meaningless assurances, such as "No stand-downs without pay" and "Where a stand-down must occur, minimum living wages to be maintained."

What are "minimum living wages?" Similar questions apply to "guarantees" of "restrictions" on compulsory redundancies and "existing or recent casuals being given preference for any available work."

The only requirement set by the resolution is that the "national framework" must be "demonstrably better" than "allowing managerial prerogative to go unfettered." This means a virtually unlimited licence to destroy jobs and conditions.

In order to defeat this wholesale assault, members of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the Socialist

Equality Party (SEP) have opened up a critical debate. They have spoken at several union branch meetings to expose the role of the NTEU and outline an alternative socialist perspective.

They have strongly opposed the very conception, being enforced by the NTEU, that university workers and students must bear the burden of the universities' financial crisis, which has been caused by years of funding cuts by successive governments and now intensified by the response of the political establishment and the corporate elite to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

CFPE and SEP members have explained that this is not a temporary meltdown that can be addressed by supposedly "time-limited" NTEU concessions. In reality, the government and university managements are exploiting the pandemic to implement a sweeping and destructive restructuring at the expense of employees and students.

Over the next three years alone, the universities collectively face the loss of \$19 billion in revenue, primarily because of the collapse of lucrative income from international students. In order to end universities' reliance on foreign students—especially from China—the federal government has vindictively refused to protect these hundreds of thousands of students from mass unemployment and destruction of their part-time jobs, and instead instructed them to "go home."

Above all, CFPE and SEP speakers have raised the necessity for a struggle to completely reorganise society along socialist lines, including the allocation of billions of dollars to public education, instead of big business and the wealthy elite being bailed out by huge "rescue packages." They have explained that this means breaking from the NTEU's pro-capitalist political and industrial straitjacket and forming new working class organisations. They moved the following resolution:

That this meeting:

1. Rejects all the concessions being offered by the NTEU to employers at this university and nationally.
2. Condemns all efforts to make university workers and students pay for the billions of dollars cut from funding by Coalition and Labor governments over the

past decade, and the failure of capitalist governments to avert the global COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Opposes the splitting up of university employees, via the variation of individual enterprise agreements.

4. Calls for a national stoppage and mass online meeting of all tertiary education workers on May Day, Friday May 1, to plan a unified national struggle against the attack on jobs, pay and conditions.

5. Demands that, instead of big business and the banks being bailed out with billions of dollars, resources be poured into education funding, at all levels, to guarantee the basic social right to free, first-class education for all students, including international students, and full-time jobs for all university workers.

6. Calls for the formation of rank-and-file action committees of tertiary education workers and students—independent of the NTEU, governments and employers—to fight for these demands and ensure the health, safety and well-being of workers and students from COVID-19, before any return to face-to-face teaching and working.

So far, this resolution has won significant but minority support, in the face of repeated anti-democratic efforts by NTEU office-bearers to block the debate. Other union members have abstained, often voicing agreement with, and warm appreciation for, the analysis behind the resolution but not yet willing to accept the need for a break from the union apparatus.

At Western Sydney University, two union members had to move dissent from the branch president's ruling, in order to allow a discussion on the resolution, which was ultimately delayed until a second meeting. At Macquarie University, debate on the resolution was bureaucratically cut off and submerged into a vote on a branch executive motion to back the national talks.

Similar methods were used to push through last Friday's national council vote, even though the councillors are among the closest supporters of the NTEU leadership. No amendments to the official motion were allowed, and the "debate" lasted less than 20 minutes before the vote was carried by 89 to 13.

These are not aberrations. In every meeting and email to members, the NTEU acts as an industrial police force. It declares that university workers must not take industrial action to fight the employer offensive because that would be illegal and workers would face fines of more than \$12,000 a day under the Fair Work Act.

All the unions, including the NTEU, backed this legislation when the Rudd-Gillard Labor government imposed it in 2009, precisely because it gave the unions a weapon to block all industrial action, except during narrow "bargaining periods." The Act even outlaws action by workers to oppose employer "variations" of enterprise agreements, just as the NTEU is now

proposing.

The only concern of the NTEU is that it retains its place as partner of the employers in enforcing this offensive via the enterprise bargaining system. Since the 1980s, the NTEU has drawn up agreements that have allowed managements to substantially casualise their work forces and carry out frequent "restructuring" cuts to jobs.

This flows from the basic 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 Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus when she vowed, on national television, that the unions would give employers "everything you want" in response to the pandemic.

A phoney "no campaign" is being promoted by pseudo-left groups in order to channel disgusted university workers back into the arms of the NTEU. According to Socialist Alternative: "A leadership that genuinely wanted to fight would be trying to harness the energy apparent in the mobilisations against concessions, at the very least as a bargaining chip."

Not only does this foster dangerous illusions in the NTEU changing course, it provides a recipe for the union to proceed with its collaboration, while cynically using the anger of members as a "bargaining chip."

The truth is that the crisis provoked by COVID-19 has further exposed the totally pro-management nature of the unions, including the NTEU. It shows the necessity for workers to break from them entirely and build new workplace and community rank-and-file organisations, based on a fight against the profit-driven capitalist system itself.

We urge university workers and students who want to fight back and discuss these issues with us to contact the CFPE Facebook site or email the SEP at sep@sep.org.au.

The authors also recommend:

Outrage among Australian university workers over secret NTEU pay cut talks
[20 April 2020]

Hostility to workers' questions at online Australian union event
[23 April 2020]

COVID-19 and the role of Labor and the unions in Australia
[16 April 2020]



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