

Australian university union agrees to unprecedented pay and job cuts

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After weeks of backroom negotiations with the employers, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) today released a “heads of agreement” that allows university managements to cut wages by up to 15 percent and destroy thousands of jobs, including by forced redundancies.

The agreement shatters the NTEU’s claim that it volunteered sacrifices of wages and conditions to “protect jobs” from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In giving carte blanche to the employers, the deal goes far beyond anything previously suggested to NTEU members.

The outrage of university workers, already shocked by the NTEU rushing in to these talks, behind their backs, will intensify as the full details of the union’s deal become known and as individual universities and their NTEU branches move to inflict its terms, institution by institution.

In a media release, the NTEU claimed a great victory: “Landmark agreement preserves 12,000 jobs and hard won university conditions.”

Nothing could be further from the truth. Wages can be cut by up to 15 percent, even exceeding the 10 percent cuts previously mentioned at an NTEU national council meeting. So-called “Category B” universities only have to claim a 10 percent reduction in revenue to inflict a 15 percent cut, while “Category A” institutions that claim a 5 percent fall can cut wages by 10 percent. Only \$30,000 of a wage is exempt from these reductions.

In an email to NTEU members this morning, national president Alison Barnes claimed that the “Jobs Protection Framework” will: “Save at least 12,000 jobs nationally,” “Limit redundancies and prevent stand-downs without pay” and “Help casual and fixed-term staff to regain and retain their work.”

These are all patent lies. According to point 2 of the “National Memorandum of Understanding”: “The Parties

estimate that this package will save in the vicinity of 10,000 to 12,000 jobs of university employees if implemented in full across the Australian university sector.”

That is, if the union foists on its members all the cost-cutting measures permitted by the deal, perhaps “in the vicinity” of 10,000 jobs might be “saved”—out of an estimated 30,000 being eliminated.

The same goes for mass sackings. By paragraph 44 of the “heads of agreement,” forced redundancies are permitted due to “a reduction in work.” This can include where a university is permanently abolishing “a substantial work function (such as the abolition of a discipline)” or closing a campus, or “where there is a surplus of employees due to insufficiency of work in a particular work unit or function.”

Likewise with the axing of casuals and contract workers, thousands of whom have already had their jobs eliminated over the past six weeks. Paragraphs 33 and 34 of the agreement say that where their work “has reduced as a result of the impact of COVID-19,” they “will have first order of preference to resume that work.” Yet, many of these jobs will never resume because of the long-term impact of the global pandemic and because universities are pressuring full-time employees to work overload, in violation of workplace agreements, in order to replace casuals and contract workers.

Contrary to Barnes’s email, large-scale stand-downs are also permitted. Paragraph 36 accepts the use of section 524 of the Fair Work Act to stand down employees due to an alleged “stoppage of work,” and allows managements to cut their pay by up to 50 percent for the duration of the stand-down, as long as the university has supposedly exhausted “all options for other work to be performed.”

Many similar clauses exist, for example, allowing universities to increase workloads and force the taking of annual and long service leave.

The NTEU, which has collaborated with university managements for decades, will become fully integrated at all levels as a formal partner in policing this agreement against its members. Both “parties” will nominate three people to form a National Expert Panel to oversee the deal’s implementation. Local NTEU branches will join COVID-19 Temporary Measures Committees to approve “change management processes,” that is, wholesale cuts.

The NTEU claims that these concessions are “time-limited,” with an end date of June 30 next year, but the crisis triggered by the pandemic and the response of governments will last far longer. Universities Australia has predicted losses totalling \$19 billion over the next three years alone. This is primarily due to the loss of income from international students, whom universities have exploited as cash cows for years to offset punishing cuts in funding by Labor-Greens and Liberal-National governments alike.

For weeks, the NTEU has blocked all action by university workers to fight this onslaught, including by invoking the threat of huge fines under the Fair Work Act, while holding out the prospect of a “job protection framework.”

This fraud is now fully exposed. Universities are already moving to exploit the “heads of agreement.” La Trobe University vice chancellor, John Dewar, one of the signatories to the deal with the NTEU, sent an email to staff declaring that up to 800 jobs, or nearly a quarter of the workforce, will go, depending on how the management saves by pay cuts, “voluntary” redundancies and “restructuring.”

Having spent two years locking university workers into the latest round of enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs)—which the NTEU also hailed as victories—the union is working hand-in-glove with individual managements to tear up anything in these EBAs that stands in the way of the unprecedented attack on pay and conditions.

While “variations” to EBAs must go to ballots under the Fair Work Act, there is nothing democratic about this process. University workers and students are being presented with a fait accompli.

This is not an aberration. The NTEU’s agreement fulfills the pledge offered last month by Australian Council of Trade Unions secretary Sally McManus that the unions would give employers “everything they want” in response to the pandemic. These are not working class organisations but thoroughly pro-capitalist apparatuses enforcing the requirements of the corporate elite.

Barnes told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: “Our union intervened to prevent the collapse of tertiary education in Australia and secure the livelihoods of 12,000 university workers.” Far from the livelihoods of workers, the NTEU’s concern is to prop up the tertiary education “industry,” which is one of Australian capitalism’s biggest money-spinners, worth more than \$30 billion a year in revenues.

Even before today’s announcement, there was widespread opposition to the union’s betrayal, partially reflected in several NTEU branch resolutions opposing concessions. Pseudo-left groups are trying to head off a revolt against the union by circulating petitions and calls for an NTEU “day of action.” They are peddling illusions that this same union will lead a “fight” against the federal government’s funding cuts.

These groups are trying desperately to prop up the NTEU and keep workers trapped in the pro-capitalist framework of the trade unions. Their petition advises the NTEU to at least put up a show of resistance. The union “cannot be seen to be bargaining away our pay and conditions, it has to fight for them,” it states.

In order to defeat this wholesale assault, Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and Socialist Equality Party members have spoken at union branch meetings to expose the role of the NTEU, oppose all concessions and outline the necessity for a totally opposed perspective: The 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.”

This means breaking from the NTEU’s pro-capitalist straitjacket and forming new rank-and-file committees of workers and students. To take forward this discussion and organise a fight against the NTEU sellout, the CFPE is holding an online forum this Sunday, May 17, at 4 pm: “The COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis in the universities.”

To participate contact the CFPE Facebook page or email the SEP at sep@sep.org.au, or click on this Zoom link just before 4 pm on Sunday: <https://zoom.us/j/94447278547>



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