

Australian university union's national deal collapses in face of widespread opposition

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Fearing a revolt by university workers, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has abandoned a proposed national COVID-19 pay-slashing deal. But the union will intensify its collaboration with individual managements to try and impose deep cuts to jobs, wages and conditions.

The hostility of academics and other university staff members to the NTEU's "national framework" partnership with the employers has thrown the union into a crisis. Two months of backroom talks, in which the union volunteered wage cuts of up to 15 percent, produced shock and outrage, and numerous membership votes to reject the agreement.

As the WSWs warned from the outset, the deal was designed to make university staff pay the price for the pandemic and the budget shortfalls—\$19 billion over the next three years alone—expected as a result of the federal government's refusal to bail out the universities.

Just days before the NTEU had planned to put its "heads of agreement" to a countrywide postal ballot, it suddenly announced on Tuesday night that the deal was no longer "viable" because 17 of the country's 39 public universities had walked away from it.

In reality, the ballot was likely to result in an historic defeat for the union, given the level of rank-and-file opposition. Not only did the agreement offer outright pay cuts, it permitted the destruction of at least 18,000 of the 30,000 jobs that employers are scrapping.

Despite its debacle, the NTEU's drive to assist the employers is far from over. The union said it will proceed with ballots to seek to enforce the agreement at any university whose management signs up to it. At other universities, the NTEU and its branch officials will step up their efforts to deliver whatever demands each management makes.

NTEU branches have pledged to continue "cooperating" with their managements to slash budgets. For years, they have struck enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs) with these employers that have helped transformed universities into highly-casualised business empires serving the needs of the financial elite.

The NTEU vowed to "vigorously oppose any non-union ballot to vary Enterprise Agreements." That reveals the union's main preoccupation. It is to retain its policing role over university workers via its own "variations" to the already regressive EBAs it has imposed over the past two years.

As also warned by the WSWs, the employers are already exploiting the role of the union in stifling resistance for the past two months, as thousands of casuals' jobs were eliminated and increased workloads were imposed. The managements have gone on the offensive, unveiling hundreds of job cuts, including at the Australian National University, Central Queensland University, Sydney, Wollongong and Deakin.

In a media release, NTEU national president Alison Barnes complained: "The NTEU approached negotiations with the Australian Higher Education Industry Association (AHEIA) in good faith." While the NTEU had "good faith" with the employers, it entered the talks without any authorisation, let alone votes, by its members.

AHEIA executive director Stuart Andrews made a revealing comment. He told the media that some managements were "concerned" that the opposition shown by NTEU members "will result in the deal being defeated at staff votes." In other words, the employers too were afraid that the union faced a rebellion.

Desperate to repair the NTEU's shattered credibility with workers, Barnes declared in her media release:

“NTEU will now escalate to what will be historically high levels of industrial disputation and campaigning to fight for every job. This could have been avoided.”

That is an utter fraud. The NTEU will intensify its attempts to suppress the revolt it tried so hard to “avoid.” Its national framework was not an aberration. It took to a new level decades of collaboration with governments and employers, especially since the Accords and enterprise bargaining regime imposed by the unions under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments in the 1980s and 1990s.

Moreover, the NTEU will do everything it can to enforce the tripartite compact entered into this week by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) with the Liberal-National government and the employers. Together, they are urging workers to “lay down their weapons”—that is, submit to the further pro-business restructuring of workplace relations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Barnes herself spearheaded the ACTU and NTEU’s ever-closer partnership with the employers when she headed the NTEU branch at Sydney’s Macquarie University, where the union adopted “interest-based bargaining.” That doctrine, based on the proposition that employers and their employees have common, rather than opposed, interests in driving up profits, was imposed to push through a sellout EBA deal at Macquarie in 2018.

Equally fraudulently, the union’s media release stated: “NTEU members will now continue to ramp up their campaign against the federal government and the Vice Chancellors who have abandoned their workforce.”

There has been no genuine “campaign.” The union has blocked any mobilisation of university workers against the government and the employers. The union’s pleas for its members to urge Education Minister Dan Tehan to “do his job” by saving the tertiary education industry proved a complete dead-end.

Far from acceding to the NTEU’s entreaties, Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government has escalated its attack on the public universities. After repeatedly changing the rules of its JobKeeper wage subsidy scheme to exclude university workers, the government this week permitted four private universities—Notre Dame, Bond, Torrens and the University of Divinity—to access it, offering them hundreds of millions more

dollars.

Now, the union proposes a protest delegation to Canberra, plus a “public campaign” in the upcoming federal by-election in Eden Monaro. As the NTEU has done for years, such activities seek to keep university workers trapped within the framework of the corporate-controlled parliamentary order, essentially backing the return of another pro-business Labor-Greens government. The last such government, under Julia Gillard, began the slashing of billions of dollars from universities.

These bitter experiences show the necessity for a political break from the NTEU and all the pro-capitalist trade unions, and the building of completely independent rank-and-file committees. These are essential to (1) organise a nationwide, unified struggle to defend all jobs and basic rights, (2) protect university staff from unsafe COVID-19 conditions and (3) link up with workers internationally who are facing similar critical struggles against the impact of the worsening global crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic is not simply the product of a coronavirus. The response of governments, from Trump to Morrison—their cuts to medical research, lack of pandemic preparation and indifference to the lives of working people—flows from the subordination of human needs to capitalist profits and the accumulation of personal wealth.

Therefore, what is required is an alternative, socialist perspective, based on the complete reorganisation of society in the interests of all, instead of the financial elite. All those who want to take forward this fight should contact the Committee For Public Education, established by the Socialist Equality Party.

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