

# Australian university union pushes through pay-cutting deal at Western Sydney

Our correspondent  
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A meeting at Western Sydney University last Friday was a case study in the industrial policing role of trade unions. It displayed their anti-democratic methods and desperation to suppress resistance by workers to the slashing of jobs, wages and conditions via the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite outraged opposition, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) pushed through a vote for a pay-cutting Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the management. It did so by a combination of preventing genuine discussion, refusing to circulate opposing resolutions, backing management threats and making totally misleading statements about the contents of the MOU.

The meeting was called just a week after the NTEU abandoned a national COVID-19 “framework” deal with the employers, fearing a growing revolt by university workers and the defeat of its plan in a plebiscite of members. Two months of backroom talks, in which the union volunteered wage cuts of up to 15 percent, had produced widespread hostility.

Last Friday’s events at Western Sydney confirmed the warning issued by the WSWs that despite its debacle the union will intensify its collaboration with individual managements to seek to impose deep cuts to jobs, wages and conditions.

For weeks, the NTEU’s branch committee backed the union’s national negotiations. But a branch membership meeting on May 22 voted by 143 to 21 to defeat its call to “endorse the National Jobs Protection Framework.”

The NTEU then rapidly finalised, together with the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), an MOU with the Western Sydney management to achieve much the same result, albeit with smaller pay cuts.

The purpose of the MOU was summed up in its

preamble. “Recognising the financial strain placed upon the University by the impacts of Covid19,” the document committed the unions to supporting measures to “protect the financial security of the institution” and “the employment security of University staff.”

In other words, the NTEU and CPSU, which covers some professional staff, agreed to impose cost-cutting measures on their members, while pretending this would enhance “employment security.”

The MOU does nothing to protect any employee. It agrees to pay cuts over the next six months via the “purchase” by staff of up to eight extra leave days and to forced leave-taking during specified periods. The document commits the management to nothing in return, just no “forced” redundancies for “COVID reasons” in 2020 and no stand-downs “without pay” during 2020.

This does not prevent the management from eliminating jobs for other reasons, such as course closures or restructurings, or from standing down workers on part-pay. It has an even freer hand for 2021 and beyond, when greater revenue losses are expected.

For those on limited-term contracts, the MOU explicitly states: “In consultation with unions, the University reserves the right not to continue fixed term employment contracts where the work in which they are engaged is not available.”

There is no ban on increasing academic or administrative workloads, which has already taken place. In some instances, staff members have had their workloads virtually doubled.

There is a vague promise to retain the overall budget for casual workers at the same level as March 2020, but many casuals will not be employed in the coming second semester, because full-time staff have been asked to work over load.

Despite the earlier vote to reject the NTEU's national framework, the document specifies that the management's actions "will be consistent with the national Framework."

A revised version of the MOU was circulated to NTEU members just an hour before last Friday's meeting, giving them no time to properly review it.

Throughout the meeting, the union sought to prevent any genuine debate. No opposing motions, including one submitted in advance by Socialist Equality Party member Mike Head, were circulated or permitted to be put. A vote was set for 12.10, just 40 minutes after the meeting began.

A motion to halt the vote for a week to allow members to study the MOU was brushed aside, despite angry protests. Then followed a filibustering report by the branch president, David Burchell, designed to ensure that virtually no time was left for debate.

Burchell falsely claimed that the MOU would ensure job security "for almost everyone," and insisted that it would protect casuals in particular.

The branch president declared repeatedly that the vote had to be taken, or the management would put the MOU to a postal ballot on its own. Thus, he lined up behind the management's intimidation.

Eventually, a few speakers were allowed two minutes each. Opposing the MOU, Head said it was another version of the national deal that members had overwhelmingly rejected.

The SEP member emphasised the globally worsening pandemic and the universal drive to make the working class bear its burden, enforced by all the unions.

He explained that the pandemic was a product of the conditions created by global capitalism and was being worsened by profit-driven government responses. That was why an alternative anti-capitalist, that is socialist, perspective was necessary.

Head urged the formation of rank-and-file action committees of tertiary education workers and students—independent of the NTEU, governments and employers. He said these were 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.

After the severely truncated debate, 80 percent of the 223 participants reportedly voted "yes." This primarily represents a relatively small layer of union supporters, compared to the 3,500 or so full-time staff at the university, plus thousands more casuals.

The management will now put the MOU to a ballot of all staff, both academic and professional. Staff members need to carefully study the MOU and vote "no." That is a first step in fighting back against the mounting attack on pay, jobs and conditions taking place across the country.

Encouraged by the NTEU's role in blocking resistance while the union engaged in lengthy talks with the employers, managements everywhere have gone on the offensive, including by announcing hundreds of job losses.

The NTEU's anti-democratic methods are not new. By such means, the NTEU has imposed regressive workplace agreements for decades. These have helped successive governments, both Liberal-National and Labor, to transform universities into businesses servicing the needs of the ruling financial elite.

The bitter experience at Western Sydney shows that the NTEU will stop at nothing to satisfy the employers and retain its enforcement role. To fight this assault, there is an urgent necessity to build genuine working class organisations—rank-and-file committees.

This means turning to a socialist perspective, based on the total reorganisation of society in the interests of all, instead of the financial oligarchy. All those who want to take forward this fight should contact the Committee For Public Education, established by the SEP.

Email: [cfpe.aus@gmail.com](mailto:cfpe.aus@gmail.com)

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