

# NTEU helps Australian universities escalate job and wage cuts

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With the federal Liberal-National government adamantly refusing to rescue the country's public universities from the devastating impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic, managements are unveiling hundreds of job cuts, together with attacks on pay and conditions.

So far, the jobs destroyed include at least 400 at La Trobe University, about 300 at Deakin University, and nearly 300 at Central Queensland University, which plans to close its Sunshine Coast, Yeppoon and Biloela campuses, hitting these regional centres hard.

Threats of unspecified job losses, including forced redundancies, have been issued at Charles Sturt University, Wollongong University, the University of the Sunshine Coast, Swinburne University, the University of Tasmania, the Australian National University and the University of Canberra. At the University of Sydney, the arts faculty will eliminate 8 percent of its units.

Elsewhere, the employers are demanding pay freezes or cuts, on top of the destruction of thousands of casual academic and administrative jobs, either by variations to NTEU enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs) or by exploiting existing EBA provisions. At the University of Melbourne, the measures include a pay cut of 2.2 percent, reductions in redundancy pay and no limits on involuntary redundancies.

Education Minister Dan Tehan reiterated the government's stand on Wednesday, bluntly telling the universities they needed "greater focus on domestic students, online education and greater alignment with industry needs."

This means accelerating the pro-business transformation of the universities. They are being told to slash costs, service the training and research needs of the corporate elite and end their reliance on overseas

students, especially from China.

The government is also demanding that the universities, like schools, physically reopen, despite the danger of COVID-19 outbreaks in crowded lecture theatres and classrooms. Tehan said the government's priority was "the further reopening of campuses for face-to-face learning."

In order to comply with these orders, university managements are exploiting the efforts of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) to stifle university workers' outrage and opposition. For two months, throughout April and May, the NTEU suppressed all resistance while it conducted backroom talks with the employers on a national "framework" to permit pay cuts of up to 15 percent, while still allowing at least 18,000 job losses.

Facing widespread rank-and-file hostility to the agreement, and with the employers losing confidence in the NTEU's capacity to deliver it, the union finally abandoned the deal. Far from being deterred by this historic blow to its credibility, however, the union is now working intensely with individual managements to impose their requirements.

As at Western Sydney University, the NTEU is using anti-democratic methods to shut down debate and push through agreements to cut wages, with no more guarantees against redundancies than in its national "framework."

At some universities, such as Monash, La Trobe and the University of Western Australia, the NTEU is still trying to ram through versions of its national sellout, even overriding rejection votes by its own members. At La Trobe, the NTEU backed management's plan for a 10 percent wage cut for at least 12 months, which the vice chancellor said would save 225 jobs but would still result in around 400 redundancies.

On May 27, an NTEU branch meeting at La Trobe voted by 60 percent, 138 to 62, to reject the national framework. Determined to fight all job cuts, including those of casuals, the participants also voted by 74 percent, 110 to 22, to “condemn any sacking of casual staff or standing down of staff in relation to COVID-19.” They signalled that they would “refuse variations to the EBA to overload our teaching or professional responsibilities as a result of work being stripped from casuals.”

In an extraordinary exposure of the role of unions, the NTEU refused to accept these outcomes. It claimed the votes were “non-binding” and called a postal ballot of La Trobe’s NTEU members, which started on Thursday, in a bid to reverse the rejection of the national agreement.

Under a revised management “offer,” staff would receive a sliding pay cut, depending on their classification, their annual leave would be reduced to 10 days and they would receive no pay increases until 2022.

To back the union’s effort to intimidate staff members into dropping their opposition, vice-chancellor John Dewar this week revealed that the university was negotiating with banks for a loan to cover its debts. As part of these negotiations, “the banks are interested to see actions around balancing our books over time,” he said.

In other words, the NTEU is working with management to impose the requirements of the banks, as well as the federal government, on the university.

La Trobe workers should vote “no” to defeat this attack, but that is only the first step. The NTEU’s collaboration with the employers is not an aberration. It is part of a wider drive by the unions to enforce cuts to jobs, pay and conditions in partnership with employers across entire industries, such as retail, fast food, hospitality and the clerical sector. In the words of Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus, the unions are giving employers “everything you want.”

These developments underscore the necessity for the call issued by the Committee for Public Education and the Socialist Equality Party for the formation of rank-and-file committees of tertiary education workers and students—completely independent of the pro-management NTEU.

Such committees, democratically elected, are essential to organise a nationwide, unified struggle to defend all jobs and basic rights, protect university staff from unsafe COVID-19 conditions and link up with workers internationally who are facing similar critical struggles against the impact of the worsening global crisis.

La Trobe’s crisis is typical of the plight of the public universities, which have turned to exploiting full fee-paying international students over the past decade to offset the slashing of billions of dollars in funding by successive federal governments, starting with the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard.

A quarter of La Trobe’s 2019 revenue came from overseas students. Some universities depend even more on this revenue: 34 percent at Monash, 36 percent at RMIT and 35 percent at UTS.

Universities Australia this week said universities faced a combined revenue loss of up to \$4.8 billion in 2020 and \$16 billion by 2023. Even these estimates could be optimistic if the coronavirus pandemic continues to worsen globally.

All the causes of this crisis—the slashing of university funding, the pandemic itself and the profit-driven government responses to the pandemic—are products of global capitalism. That is why a socialist perspective, based on the total reorganisation of society in the interests of all, instead of the financial oligarchy, is necessary to fight this historic assault on universities and their workers. All those who want to take forward this struggle should contact the Committee for Public Education.

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