

Reject Australian universities-NTEU job and pay cuts!

The Committee for Public Education and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality
15 June 2020

University workers and students in Australia, like their fellow staff and students around the world, confront an historic assault. Governments and managements are exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic to eliminate tens of thousands of university jobs and slash wages and conditions.

Not only are the livelihoods of university employees, both academic and administrative, permanent and casual, at stake, so are the conditions of students, whether domestic or international. The job losses, together with course and campus closures, mean lower quality education, larger classes and worse services and facilities. This is on top of many students losing their jobs and international students being denied any welfare payments, threatening them with destitution.

Despite intense opposition among university workers, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) are collaborating with the university managements to push through ballots to impose the cuts.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) call for “no” votes in all these ballots. This is a first step toward a unified struggle by university workers and students for the defence of jobs and conditions and for the right to decent, free and first-class education for all, including international students.

This will require the formation of democratically elected rank-and-file committees of university workers and students. These must be completely independent of the trade unions, which have shown they are nothing but industrial police forces. The NTEU and CPSU have not only opposed any mobilisation of their own members, but also any joint struggle with students. As for the National Union of Students, it has disappeared from view.

Such committees are essential to (1) organise a nationwide, unified struggle to defend all jobs and basic rights, (2) protect university staff and students from unsafe COVID-19 conditions and (3) link up with workers and students internationally who are facing similar critical struggles against the impact of the worsening global crisis.

University workers need to reject the ultimatum being put forward by the governments, management and the trade unions:

accept wage cuts and other concessions or face redundancies. This is the framework created by governments and the financial elite.

The worsening global pandemic is not the only cause of the deep crisis in the country’s 39 public universities. Universities have been starved of funds for years, with billions of dollars cut by every government since the last Greens-backed Labor government of 2007–13. Increasingly, soaring class sizes, rising student fee debts, rampant casualisation and corporate restructuring have dominated campuses.

Aided by the unions, the federal Coalition government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison is exploiting the pandemic to intensify this process. It has left the universities facing estimated revenue losses of \$16 billion over the next four years alone, primarily caused by the pandemic’s impact on high-fee paying international students.

COVID-19 is not simply a natural disaster. The pandemic has triggered a monumental failure of the capitalist profit system around the world. Every aspect of the response of governments—their protracted cuts to public healthcare and medical research, lack of pandemic preparation and indifference to the lives of working people—flows from the subordination of human needs to private profit and the accumulation of personal wealth.

An unprecedented rank-and-file revolt triggered the collapse of a pay-cutting “national framework” agreement volunteered by the NTEU. There was outrage as the union worked behind the backs of its members to offer to cut wages by up to 15 percent, while still allowing, by its own admission, the elimination of 18,000 jobs.

For two months, the NTEU stifled all opposition by conducting backroom talks with the employers on their joint “national framework,” thus permitting the government and the employers to go on the offensive.

Having already axed the employment of thousands of casuals, universities across the country have begun unveiling further job cuts, including forced redundancies. So far, they include at least 400 at La Trobe University, about 300 at Deakin University, and nearly 300 at Central Queensland University.

The Morrison government has excluded the public universities from its JobKeeper wage subsidy scheme, while

pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into corporate pockets via “stimulus” packages. The government has told the universities to slash costs, focus on “greater alignment with industry needs” and end their reliance on overseas students, especially from China.

This means accelerating the pro-business transformation of the universities into vocational institutions, which is antithetical to critical thinking and the exposure to new ideas that young people must have for a genuine education and preparation for the future.

As part of their broader rush to lift all public health restrictions to restore corporate profits, 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. Already, the University of Adelaide has begun resuming face-to-face teaching.

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.**”

Having suffered a debacle over its “national framework,” the NTEU is resorting to anti-democratic methods to try to ram through votes for deals it is striking with individual employers, designed to deliver multi-million dollar cost cuts.

At Western Sydney University, the NTEU shut down debate and relied on management threats of redundancies to try to push through an agreement. That deal will go to a postal ballot on June 17. It involves pay cuts of up to 6 percent over six months, plus seven extra days of mandatory leave, to save the management \$15 million, with no real guarantees against job cuts in 2020, let alone beyond that.

In an email to members, NTEU branch president David Burchell described the deal as “a measured and appropriate sacrifice by all University staff” that is “in line with the historic values and mission of the trade union movement.” This is a revealing comment on the role of unions in enforcing “sacrifice” by workers for the benefit of employers. For his part, the university’s vice chancellor, Barney Glover, sent an email to all staff, thanking the leadership of both the NTEU and CPSU for “their willingness to constructively engage with University management.”

At La Trobe University, the NTEU even defied a branch meeting vote to reject its “national framework” and fight all job cuts. It is backing a management postal ballot on June 16 and 17 for a wage-cutting agreement, based on the national agreement, that would still allow around 400 redundancies.

At other universities, such as Melbourne, the NTEU has opposed postal ballots conducted by the management without the union’s agreement. But this is not because the union rejects pay and job cuts. On the contrary, the union’s sole

preoccupation is with preserving its place as the vehicle for imposing such attacks. After that university’s staff voted last week to defeat the management’s ballot proposal for a 2.2 percent pay cut, NTEU president Alison Barnes said the result sent a message to other universities to work “co-operatively” with the union.

The NTEU’s anti-democratic methods are not new. By such means, the NTEU has imposed regressive enterprise bargaining agreements for decades. These have helped managements and successive governments, both Labor and Liberal-National, turn the universities into highly-casualised business conglomerates.

The bitter experiences of recent weeks show that the NTEU will stop at nothing to satisfy the employers and retain its enforcement role. To fight this assault, it is necessary to build genuine working-class organisations—rank-and-file committees of university workers and students.

These committees should demand that, instead of big business being bailed out with billions of dollars, and billions more being handed to the military, resources be poured into healthcare and education funding, to protect the population from COVID-19 and guarantee the basic social right to free, first-class education for all students, including international students, and full-time jobs for all university workers.

These demands require challenging the capitalist profit system and its grip over society. That means turning to a socialist perspective, based on the total reorganisation of society in the interests of all, instead of the financial oligarchy. We urge all university workers and students who want to take forward this fight to contact the CFPE or IYSSE, both established by the Socialist Equality Party.

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