Australian university lecturers voice concerns about their conditions and the role of the NTEU

Our correspondent
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University educators have spoken with the *World Socialist Web Site* to voice their shock and disgust at the role of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) in volunteering jobs and pay cuts to university managements in response to the financial crisis that has been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The lecturers also spoke about their concerns for teaching conditions, rising workloads and the impact on their students. Their comments were made anonymously out of concern for victimisation by managements, which are working in close partnership with the NTEU.

A PhD student and casual lecturer at Western Sydney University (WSU) commented: "I was just stunned that the union did not even ask us if we wanted to negotiate a deal or fight the university. They made that decision for us, presuming we would be happy to negotiate away our rights."

She explained that the NTEU had sent text messages and made phone calls urging people to vote "yes" to the deal it had struck with the management, which provides for pay cuts with no real guarantees against job losses.

"One of my friends asked about what the agreement meant by keeping the March 2020 budget for casuals and the union lady said she would get back to my friend but, naturally, did not!

"What I want to know is what is their skin in the game? Why are they so determined for a Yes vote? Barney [Glover, the vice chancellor] could not have a better promoter! It is a slippery downward slide they are heading into."

A full-time WSU lecturer said she had been in the New South Wales (NSW) Lecturers Association during the 1980s, when academics "were campaigning for fewer teaching hours—18 to 24 hours per week was not unusual—and increased salaries.

"When the management refused to negotiate, we took action, went on strike and marched from Sussex Street to Parliament House in Macquarie Street, wearing full academic dress. Those were the days!"

After returning to the university 20 years later, the scenario was different. "The Lecturers Association had become the NTEU… I am, and have always been, a committed supporter of the unions. With one grandfather who was a Bolshevik and the other who took part in the 1926 General Strike and the Jarrow Hunger March in the UK, I suppose I had little choice. However, I did not join the NTEU. I decided to wait and see. Given the current weak and shiftless executive, I am now thankful that I did.

"As an outside observer, I have been appalled at the lack of commitment and desultory approach adopted by the NTEU reps at WSU. This incarnation of the union is not there to represent its members, but is rather a rubber stamp for university management policy. Last year it sat quiescent while members in two schools were subjected to the ritual humiliation of a so-called 'Refresh Program."

This program imposed severe performance and workload requirements on targeted academics, effectively placing them under threat of retrenchment.

"This was nothing more than an exercise in performance management in which academics, who had undeniably contributed to the success of these schools through excellence in their teaching and achievements, were hauled up before the Dean and a representative of Human Resources. Essentially, the

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program (or pogrom?) was an attempt to stifle opposition, through intimidation, to changes in School Work Plan (workload) policies…

"This year, however, the COVID-19 crisis has cast an even greater shadow over the rapidly plummeting reputation of the NTEU. Recently, the university management proposed, in effect, to force academic and professional staff to make good the financial losses sustained by the university as a result of the fall in enrolments caused by the virus. The proposal includes the increase in mandatory leave days, as well as cuts to salaries. The union agreed to these proposals and, as a result, its cowardly and shameful failure to defend the working conditions of its members has called into question its position as a viable union."

A casual academic teaching computer science in Melbourne explained some of the super-exploitation that has been enabled by enterprise bargaining agreements struck by the NTEU. She said she had worked at seven tertiary education institutions. "I was looking for better conditions and after trying with seven of them I realised they are all the same…

"At the moment I'm doing more than a full-time load and I'm earning $55,000 per year. Many nights I work until midnight finishing marking. There is so much pressure with four subjects, but at the end you get nothing."

A full-time lecturer at a private university college near Sydney expressed concern at a permanent shift to online teaching, which was first introduced at his workplace due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"At the moment campuses across the country are planning to re-open or have re-opened, while at the same time senior academics at my institution have promoted the idea to staff that online learning may be here to stay; that this crisis should not be wasted and that online learning's time has now finally come.

"It is too early to tell what will occur in relation to job losses and whether we will remain teaching online or perhaps some kind of hybrid situation where some classes are delivered face-to-face while others are online. What I do know is that the students that I have spoken with about online learning overwhelmingly reject it…

"To them, online learning is problematic for several reasons but the main ones include: Some lectures are delivered asynchronously, i.e., pre-recorded, which they do not like because of the sterility of the medium. Other lectures involve very large numbers of almost totally silent and disengaged students and nearly all tutorial classes are much too large. In short, and it is difficult to disagree, they feel that smaller class sizes are required for synchronous online learning to be more effective…

"I believe that this would have a detrimental impact on staff and students. The notion that online learning is somehow the same as, or even better than, face-to-face learning was never the case in the past and is not the case now. It is a stopgap measure to ensure continuity but should not be seen as the 'new normal.'"

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