

NTEU steps up collaboration with Australian university managements amid job cuts “tsunami”

Mike Head
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In the face of what it calls “the first wave of the predicted tsunami of job losses,” the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is intensifying its efforts to help university managements impose cuts in pay and conditions, as well as thousands of job cuts.

Despite the collapse of its pay-cutting “national framework” with university managements, which provoked a revolt by union members, the NTEU is seeking deals across the country to achieve the same basic result: The imposition of unprecedented sacrifices on university workers in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The latest July 7 edition of the NTEU magazine *Advocate* contains a list of the agreements struck by the union already, combined with appeals to both the employers and the Liberal-National government to work with the union.

One *Advocate* article boasts of the “union-supported packages” adopted at various universities. It states that “where proposals were developed cooperatively” with the NTEU, “union members are prepared to contribute to a collective effort.”

These “contributions” include 10 percent pay reduction, plus “deferral of wage rises and increments and some directions to take annual leave” at La Trobe University. Pay freezes were agreed at Monash and the University of Tasmania, as were “purchased leave schemes”—another form of wage-cutting and deferral—and other concessions at Western Sydney University (WSU) and the University of Western Australia.

The article then lists “unendorsed variations” at Wollongong, Melbourne and the Australian National University, where employers sought very similar pay

cuts and sacrifices, but without “the power of union support.” The Melbourne proposal was rejected in a staff ballot.

The union’s only objection to the “unendorsed variations” is that they do not include agreements to retain the NTEU as a management partner by establishing new employer-union committees to monitor and implement the cuts.

The *Advocate* article claims that the union-backed deals provide “guarantees on job security.” In reality, each agreement leaves open wide scope for retrenchments, on top of the thousands of jobs already eliminated, mostly of casuals.

At WSU, for example, the document commits management to nothing, 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, and it has an even freer hand for 2021 and beyond, when greater revenue losses are expected.

In another *Advocate* article, NTEU national assistant secretary Gabe Gooding admits that 20 universities have “cut casual and fixed-term staff and/or indicated that job losses are inevitable” and “many, many, more job losses are coming.”

So far, this “tsunami” includes over 400 jobs being axed at Deakin, 271 jobs at Central Queensland and 200–300 jobs at Wollongong. Gooding’s only criticism of the Deakin cuts is that they are not based on “strategic decision making,” just cost-cutting.

In fact, the NTEU already has proven that it does not oppose job cuts. It claimed that the pay cuts of up to 15 percent offered by its failed “national framework”

would “save” just 12,000 of the 30,000 jobs that Universities Australia estimates will be eliminated to overcome revenue losses of \$16 billion over the next three years.

Gooding concludes her article by pleading for the Liberal-National government and the employers to adopt “viable solutions.” In particular, she calls on “the managerial class of the sector to unify behind the common goal of a sustainable vision for higher education.”

In his article, NTEU general secretary Matthew McGowan makes a similar plea for “a mechanism for high level dialogue within the sector,” while NTEU national president Alison Barnes urges the government to “fully fund our universities so they can truly play a vital role in rebuilding Australia’s economy and help create a better future for all Australians.”

These appeals align directly with the government’s pro-business and nationalist program, which is what lies behind its ongoing refusal to offer any financial assistance to the public universities.

In a July 2 media statement, Education Minister Dan Tehan stepped up the commercialisation of universities by announcing new “partnerships between universities and industry,” known as Industrial Transformation Research Hubs, to produce “real-world commercial” research.

“We want universities to be even more entrepreneurial and engaged with industry,” Tehan stated. This was “part of our Job-ready Graduates reforms.”

These “reforms” feature more than doubling the student fees for humanities courses, seeking to “incentivise” young people to take narrower, more vocational courses that big business regards as vital, such as science, maths, agriculture, IT, engineering, teaching and nursing.

The government also is insisting that the universities return to face-to-face teaching, threatening the health and lives of staff and students. This is part of the bipartisan drive, backed by the opposition Labor Party, to fully reopen the economy despite the worsening global COVID-19 pandemic.

This agenda consists of exploiting the COVID-19 crisis to accelerate the cost-cutting and pro-business restructuring of the 39 public universities. Far from opposing this agenda, the magazine articles confirm

that the NTEU supports the transformation of universities into institutions ever-more directly serving the profit needs of Australian capitalism.

Not only are the livelihoods and futures of university employees, both academic and administrative, at stake, so are the basic rights and conditions of students, whether domestic or international. The job losses, together with course and campus closures, mean narrower study choices, lower quality education, larger classes and worse services and facilities.

These developments underscore the call issued by the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) for 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, and full-time jobs for all university workers.

This requires the formation of democratically elected rank-and-file committees of university workers and students. These have to be completely independent of the NTEU and other trade unions, which have shown they are nothing but political and industrial police forces, committed to meeting the requirements of big business.

Such a struggle means challenging the capitalist profit system and turning to a socialist perspective, based on the total reorganisation of society in the interests of all, instead of the financial oligarchy.



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