

Australian university trade union concedes up to 90,000 job losses

Mike Head
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By its own admission, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is presiding over a disaster—the greatest ever destruction of jobs in the Australian university sector.

The October edition of the union’s aptly-titled *Sentry* online magazine states: “The NTEU can confirm that there have been at least 12,185 positions lost in Australian universities since March. This comprises at least 5,300 continuing positions, 6,486 casual positions and 399 fixed term positions that we are aware of. Sadly, the full figure is likely much higher.”

Based on the NTEU’s estimate that about 100,000 people are engaged on casual contracts in the sector, the magazine concludes: “[I]t is not out of the question to assume that up to 50,000 of our casual colleagues have lost work since the COVID-19 disaster began.”

That loss would take the total to around 90,000 permanent, fixed-term and casualised jobs destroyed in just over six months.

This is a staggering indictment of the NTEU and all those trying to keep university workers tied to the union. It has—like a sentry—stood guard over its members, policing the cuts by opposing any industrial action or unified political mobilisation to answer the onslaught.

The *Sentry* report asks the obvious question: “So what have we been doing?”

The NTEU’s only answer is to list a series of “Fund Unis Fairly” petitions and emails sent to Education Minister Dan Tehan and members of parliament, urging them to block the Liberal-National Coalition government’s “Jobs-ready Graduates” Bill.

“Whew indeed! It’s been a busy few weeks,” wrote NTEU national organiser Michael Evans. “Watch out for more lobbying efforts over the next few days in the lead-up to the Senate vote next week.”

In other words, the union has devoted all its activities toward stifling the anger of university workers and diverting them into the dead end of appealing to the same political establishment and parties that have stripped billions of dollars from public universities over the past decade.

The government’s bill is deeply reactionary. It ties funding to universities further transforming themselves into vocational training colleges to meet the needs of big business. But even if

the bill were blocked, the assault on jobs, course offerings, research and conditions for staff and students would continue.

And virtually all the vice-chancellors, with whom the NTEU publicly pleaded for months for a united front against the government’s measures, have backed the bill, each hoping to gain a little extra funding by implementing the government’s agenda.

The *Sentry* report covers up the NTEU’s record this year, as if university workers have forgotten!

As soon as the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in March, the union scrambled into weeks of backroom talks with the vice-chancellors, volunteering wage cuts of up to 15 percent, in return for meaningless promises not to eliminate as many jobs as initially announced.

That deal ultimately collapsed. Widespread opposition among university workers led the employers to conclude that the NTEU could not win enough support to enforce the supposed “job protection framework.” Then the union proceeded to bulldoze similar agreements through at individual universities, acting in close partnership with each management.

A recent report on the *Conversation* provides an outline of the results. “Firstly, ten universities have gained staff support to vary their enterprise agreements. These universities have individually adopted an approach similar to an earlier national Job Protection Framework proposal...”

“Enterprise agreement variations enable these universities to reduce or delay job losses by freezing salary increases and purchasing leave entitlements. While saving some jobs, some of these universities have continued with agreed voluntary redundancy programs this year and are reserving options for next year.”

Thus, either with the support of the NTEU or benefiting from university workers’ loss of confidence in the union, the managements have secured amendments to their NTEU-negotiated enterprise agreements, enabling cuts to wages and conditions, as well as jobs.

At other universities, the union’s previous agreements have given management ample room to achieve similar outcomes. The *Conversation* report continued: “Secondly, 17 universities have taken a management-led approach. These universities have implemented voluntary and involuntary redundancy

programs within the framework of existing enterprise agreements.”

The impact of this assault is becoming increasingly clear, with managements unveiling plans to abolish entire courses. Sydney’s Macquarie University last week foreshadowed the scrapping of a number of programs, including the Bachelor of Mathematical Sciences, Bachelor of Advanced Science and Master of Biostatistics.

Universities are also stepping up their efforts, in line with the government’s demands, to return to face-to-face teaching, exposing staff and students to the ongoing danger of the resurging global pandemic.

All the while, the NTEU has kept staff separated, university-by-university, and repeatedly warned its members they would face heavy fines if they took any industrial action. In doing so, the union has relied on the anti-strike laws that the union movement itself helped draft, first under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996 and then under the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013.

The purpose of these laws is to reinforce the function of the trade unions as the officially-recognised industrial police force on which governments and the corporate elite rely to suppress working-class struggles.

Politically, the NTEU’s lobbying campaign seeks, above all, to promote illusions in the Labor Party. The *Sentry* emphasises that Labor’s education spokespeople Tanya Plibersek and Senator Louise Pratt, along with right-wing “independent” Senator Jacquie Lambie, have said they will not support the bill.

Yet the last Greens-backed Labor government, in which Plibersek was a key minister, set the framework for the increasing corporatisation, casualisation and de-funding of the public universities. First, with the support of the NTEU, it imposed a capitalist market-driven “education revolution” that forced universities to compete with each other for enrolments, setting in motion a dog-eat-dog struggle for survival. Then, in 2011–13, it slashed \$2.7 billion from funding, compelling universities to turn to full fee-paying international students as cash cows.

In perpetrating its historic betrayal, the NTEU has been assisted by the various pseudo-left groups that satellite around the unions, hoping to become part of their well-paid leaderships. Socialist Alternative’s “NTEU Fightback” has time and again urged disgusted university workers to join and try to rebuild the NTEU.

Socialist Alternative and other pseudo-left organisations also have promoted the National Higher Education Action Network, which takes an even more explicit pro-NTEU position. It is proposing to ask university workers to sign a token “strike pledge” to take industrial action, sometime in the indefinite future—provided that enough other workers take the pledge. Its demand is for a vague “substantial increase in government support of universities.”

At the same time, the network is cooperating with the NTEU, calling for its supporters to “save the date for an NTEU backed rally” on October 13. The network whitewashes the pro-management role of the NTEU and other unions, saying they have been “largely powerless to defend staff, students, and universities” because of their “low membership levels” and the punitive anti-strike laws.

This is a lie. The NTEU’s record of collaborating with the employers is part of a wider decades-long union partnership with the government and big business. This has been taken to a new level by this year’s “confidential” talks involving five tripartite “working parties” on “industrial relations reform.”

The working-class disillusionment and bitterness produced by years of the unions enforcing the agenda of big business with the assistance of the anti-strike laws they helped draft have reduced the unions’ membership to about 10 percent of the country’s workforce.

Against this line-up of the government, the parliamentary elite, the NTEU and the union’s accomplices, the Socialist Equality Party and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) are continuing their fight for the formation of genuine rank-and-file committees of educators and students, completely independent of the trade union apparatuses.

These committees are essential to organise a unified struggle to defend all jobs and basic rights, protect university staff and students from unsafe COVID-19 conditions and link up with workers and students internationally who are facing similar critical struggles.

This 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. We urge all university workers and students who want to take forward this fight to contact the CFPE.

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

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