

Australian university union blocks opposition as cuts to jobs and conditions intensify

Mike Head**23 November 2020**

Thousands more jobs are currently being eliminated by the managements at Australia's public universities. Every week brings new announcements of retrenchments as the employers exploit the COVID-19 pandemic to accelerate pro-business restructuring operations.

This further wave of redundancies, both "voluntary" and forced, is on top of about 90,000 job cuts since March, as estimated by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), the main trade union covering university workers.

This offensive has reached a qualitatively new level. At the University of Sydney and elsewhere, entire departments are being shut down or subjected to "spill and fill" attacks. That is, tenured academics and other permanent staff members are being retrenched and forced to apply for smaller pools of jobs, and on reduced pay and conditions.

None of this would be possible without the role of the NTEU. From the outset of the pandemic in March, it has opposed and blocked a unified industrial and political struggle against the unprecedented assault.

With university workers isolated from each other as a result—university-by-university and even department-by-department—the managements have been emboldened to unveil far-reaching cuts. Announcements in recent weeks include:

- "Spill and fill" retrenchments of learning centre and medical science departments at the University of Sydney, on top of about 500 "voluntary" redundancies across the university.

- At least 36 "change proposals" at Western Sydney University, some involving forced redundancies or redeployments, in addition to hundreds of "voluntary" redundancies.

- About 180 forced and "voluntary" job losses at Southern Cross University, in northern New South Wales (NSW), together with the merger of six schools into four faculties.

- A university-wide restructure at Brisbane's Griffith University, which involves the destruction of 300 jobs, on top of voluntary retirements.

- The scrapping or reduction by La Trobe University, in

Victoria, of about a dozen "financially unviable" disciplines in the arts and education, including creative arts, Hindi, Indonesian, modern Greek studies, planning and community development, and philosophy, despite staff having agreed to a 10 percent pay cut.

- The elimination of more than 350 jobs at University of Technology, Sydney.

- The destruction of more than 300 jobs at Sydney's Macquarie University.

- The cutting of more than 15 percent of the workforce in a major restructure at the University of New England, in central NSW.

- At least 500 courses are under consideration to be cut or consolidated at the University of Newcastle, with five faculties to be consolidated into three.

- The University of Wollongong's new "One-UOW" plan will mean an as-yet unknown number of job cuts.

- The outsourcing of basic services, such as AV, printing, telephony, IT and library, at the Australian National University in Canberra, on top of the elimination of nearly 500 jobs by forced or voluntary "separations."

- Melbourne's Swinburne University to retrench 10 percent of its total workforce.

Worse is to come in 2021, due to deeper government funding cuts. The global resurgence of the pandemic also means there will be even fewer full fee-paying international students next year. A recent report by the Mitchell Institute said overseas applications to study in Australia have collapsed by more than 80 percent since March, and the number of international students is expected to be just 300,000, or half the pre-pandemic total, by mid-2021.

At each university, the response of the NTEU has been to appeal for consultation with the union on how to implement cost-cutting, while opposing any industrial action. Invariably, the statements issued by NTEU officials say their members accept the need for cuts to cope with revenue losses caused by COVID-19—thus opening the way for job losses—but the proposals go beyond what is necessary.

Nationally, the NTEU is telling university workers to

“draw breath” and prepare for the next round of enterprise bargaining in 2021. Yet, in that “bargaining” the union will volunteer more sacrifices of wages and conditions on the false pretext of preventing even more job losses. In fact, the NTEU’s starting point will be based on the discredited “job protection framework” of April–May, when the union offered the employers pay cuts of up to 15 percent, before being forced to abandon the package in the face of rank-and-file outrage.

In the November edition of the union’s *Sentry* magazine, NTEU national president Alison Barnes told members: “As the year draws to a close, we should stop and draw breath for a minute and reflect on what we’ve been forced to deal with: the biggest crisis the higher education sector has ever faced.”

Barnes was forced to concede the utter failure of the union’s efforts to convince various right-wing senators and the university vice-chancellors—the same people unleashing the job cuts—to oppose the Liberal-National government’s Job-Ready Graduates Bill, which will accelerate the cuts and the elimination of courses that do not meet the needs of the corporate elite.

Barnes’s “end of year” message amounts to accepting, as a fait accompli, the destruction of jobs and conditions that has occurred throughout 2020. At the same time, the union is imploring members to sign up to training sessions in the rules of enterprise bargaining.

“Enterprise bargaining is our opportunity to win improved working rights and conditions for higher education workers,” the union’s NSW secretary Michael Thomson and assistant secretary Damien Cahill claimed in one typical email.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Enterprise bargaining was first imposed on workers by the unions and the Keating Labor government in the 1990s. It is designed to atomise the working class and erode conditions, by subordinating workers to the requirements of “their” individual employer. This process has gone on for four decades, allowing the public universities to be casualised and transformed into corporate entities.

The managements and the NTEU will use the 2021 round of union bargaining to cement the deep cuts already inflicted in 2020 and demand even more sacrifices by university workers. That was confirmed in early October. An NTEU national council meeting, comprised of officials and branch delegates, “reaffirmed the NTEU’s higher education policy positions”—that is, the concessionary “job protection framework.”

Despite this, the pseudo-left parties behind the NTEU Fightback group and the National Higher Education Action Network are striving to prevent university workers from

breaking out of the NTEU’s political and industrial straitjacket.

In its report on the NTEU council meeting, the NTEU Fightback Facebook page faithfully echoed the union leadership’s call. It declared that its “supporters will be building the union from the ground up, fighting our darndest against the current job cuts, and preparing for the fight of our lives in the next bargaining round.”

The group declared its readiness to “support NTEU officials when they serve the memberships’ interests,” while claiming it would oppose them when they don’t.”

In reality, the bitter experiences of 2020 have confirmed that the NTEU, like the rest of the trade unions, is organically opposed to the interests of its members and the working class as a whole.

The pseudo-left groups, such as Socialist Alternative, Socialist Alliance and Solidarity, aspire to become the leadership of the union themselves. They are following in the footsteps of earlier members of their groups, such as Alison Barnes and Michael Thomson, who are today presiding over the destruction of jobs and conditions.

The Socialist Equality Party and the Committee for Public Education are fighting to clarify these issues for university workers and urging them to draw the essential conclusion—the need to form genuine new working class organisations, rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the trade unions.

These committees would seek to organise a nationwide, unified struggle for secure well-paid jobs and basic rights, protect staff and students from unsafe COVID-19 conditions and link up with educators nationally and internationally who are facing similar critical struggles against the impact of the worsening global crisis.

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.



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