

Australian university union appeals for closer partnerships with managements as job cuts deepen

Mike Head
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Amid a new wave of retrenchments and course closures across Australia's 39 public universities, the main trade union covering university workers is seeking to strengthen its collaboration with the managements that are implementing these cuts.

Hundreds more jobs are currently being eliminated, on top of an estimated 90,000 last year. In one of the latest announcements, the Australian National University plans to shut its research in neuroscience, the field in which it won a Nobel prize, cutting another 22 jobs, on top of the 450 already eliminated.

At several universities, including Sydney's Macquarie University, academics and professional staff alike are being compelled to compete with each other in "spill and fill" operations for the remaining positions.

This marks a deepening of an unprecedented offensive against educators and students. The devastating impact of the failure of governments worldwide to protect lives and livelihoods from the resurging COVID-19 pandemic is compounding the damage done by years of funding cuts and pro-business restructuring by both Labor and Liberal-National governments.

The response of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is to appeal to the employers to "sit down collectively" with the union to address the "new and different realities" via a fresh round of enterprise bargaining agreements.

That was the plea issued this month, in the first edition for 2021 of *Advocate*, the NTEU's online magazine, by union general secretary Matthew McGowan. "As two-thirds of university enterprise agreements expire this year, the union will be looking to address this weeping sore in our economy. But we cannot assume an easy path," he wrote.

"It should be possible for the union and the sector to

discuss the future of work and the issues we face, as professional staff and academic staff enter new and different realities."

This should be a warning to university staff. A year ago, at the start of the pandemic, the NTEU scurried into backroom talks with the employers, offering wage cuts of up to 15 percent. This was fraudulently dressed up as a "job protection framework," even though the union said it would still accept thousands of redundancies.

When outraged university workers objected, rejecting the scheme, some university employers pulled out of that national deal, concerned that the NTEU could not enforce it against its members. But the NTEU then proceeded to strike comparable agreements with individual universities, bulldozing them through despite members' discontent, paving the way for job losses, sacrifices of pay and conditions, and increased workloads.

McGowan's *Advocate* article signalled even closer relations with the managements. He said it was necessary to heal "the scars of 2020." The "most significant" scar was "the lack of trust, which was on show in spades during 2020."

McGowan wrote: "Many current and now former staff suffer deep scars resulting from the way in which the cuts and job losses were handled. And when I say job losses, I mean careers destroyed, people and families left with no income, despair in those losing their livelihood, and those left behind to pick up the pieces."

But it was the NTEU, together with the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), the other union covering university staff, that bears the central responsibility for these terrible outcomes. The unions opposed any unified struggle by university workers against the assault.

NTEU national president Alison Barnes struck a similar tone in her *Advocate* column, defending the union's

record over the past 12 months. “Despite 2020’s pervasive gloom, last year also demonstrated the resilience generated by standing together,” she claimed.

Barnes relayed the estimates of the peak employers’ body, Universities Australia, that the overall operating revenues of Australian universities fell by \$1.8 billion in 2020, and would drop a further \$2 billion in 2021. She echoed Universities Australia’s statement that “more than 17,300 jobs were lost in the sector last year,” while admitting that figure was “unlikely to include all of the casual and fixed-term positions that have gone.”

The only “resilience” that the NTEU cares about is its own survival, and its place at the bargaining table with the employers. “This year we must focus on building our workplace structures and our delegate networks,” Barnes wrote. “We need to grow our workplace strength by asking our friends and colleagues to stand with us and join the union.”

Barnes also supported the managements in pushing staff and students back onto campuses and into crowded classrooms despite the continuing dangers of the pandemic. “Campuses are resuming face-to-face teaching and related activities, but may be hampered by periodic restrictions as state governments cope with COVID outbreaks,” she wrote.

Why anyone would want to join the union, Barnes did not say. Its “workplace structures” and “delegate networks” are mechanisms for straitjacketing university workers in the enterprise bargaining system, which bans industry-wide and solidarity strikes, and for sacrificing jobs and conditions to help each employer compete for survival in the tertiary education “market.”

This industrial policing function of the trade unions was institutionalised under the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) Accords with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments in the 1980s and 1990s, and reinforced under the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013.

Alongside this muzzling of the working class, Labor spearheaded the commercialisation of tertiary education, initiated by the Hawke government’s reintroduction of fees for both domestic and international student fees. Next came the Rudd-Gillard 2008 “education revolution,” which forced universities to fight each other for enrolments, particularly from full-fee paying international students, and then cut tertiary funding by \$2.7 billion in 2013.

Labor’s market-driven Education Revolution was backed by the Greens, which kept the Gillard government

in office, and endorsed and policed by the NTEU, underlining their own commitments to meeting the strategic, vocational and profit-making demands of the Australian corporate elite.

As a result, over the past decade, successive rounds of enterprise agreements have helped transform universities into one of the most casualised industries in the country, with only about a third of employees now in secure, continuing positions.

Once again, the NTEU is peddling illusions in Labor and the Greens. It is trying to divert the discontent of university workers back into the deadend of the parliamentary establishment, despite the failure of all its parliamentary lobbying efforts last year for a financial support package for universities.

The March *Advocate* promoted Labor leader Anthony Albanese’s vague and empty claims that a future Labor government would “address some of the worst aspects of insecure work.” It advertised an online seminar on casualisation addressed by Labor and Greens senators, effectively re-endorsing the same parties that delivered the 2008 “revolution.”

Against the unions and their backers, the Committee for Public Education and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality are urging educators and students to create rank-and-file action committees, totally independent of the NTEU and CPSU. These are essential to organise a unified struggle to defend all jobs and basic rights, protect staff and students from unsafe COVID-19 conditions, and link up with workers and youth internationally who are facing similar critical struggles against the impact of the worsening global crisis.



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