

Australia: Meeting at Newcastle University lays bare union's refusal to fight job cuts

Our correspondents
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A revealing discussion erupted at a National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) meeting at the University of Newcastle (UoN) last week as the union sought to corral academics and staff into another round of enterprise bargaining—the very same framework that has facilitated an ongoing onslaught of cuts to jobs and conditions at universities across the country.

As is the case internationally, corporations and their governments have seized on the COVID-19 pandemic to accelerate a fundamental restructuring of workplace and social conditions, at the expense of workers. By the NTEU's own estimates, some 90,000 university workers' jobs were eliminated during 2020, and more cuts are being announced constantly, including at UoN and the universities of Adelaide and Western Australia.

At UoN, according to the *Newcastle Herald* last month, 150 full-time equivalent (FTE) academic positions and 64 FTE professional positions have been “disestablished,” with 52 percent and 42 percent respectively already vacant, or set to become so this year, through an early retirement scheme and the ending of fixed-term contracts.

A “spill and fill” process is forcing academics and staff to compete for “new” positions, amounting to 92.8 FTE academic staff jobs and 61.2 FTE professional staff jobs. Earlier this year, the consolidation of five faculties into three colleges was also completed, cutting or amalgamating approximately 530 of the university's 2,200 courses.

As it has nationwide, the NTEU has rejected any unified struggle against this onslaught, instead appealing to management, including via a petition drive, for greater consultation on alternative ways to secure its cost-cutting demands.

A postgraduate student member of the NTEU, and member of the International Youth and Students for

Social Equality (IYSSE) club at UoN, called for the complete rejection of the union's enterprise bargaining process. “This has led to disaster after disaster for university staff, academics and students,” he said. “The universities have been able to carry out all of the cuts in previous years through this mechanism, accelerating the restructuring of the universities along corporate lines.

“UoN management said earlier this year that its ongoing cuts and restructure are being carried out within the framework of the NTEU's 2018 enterprise bargaining agreement... The unions have only sought consultation with management on how to implement these cuts... Why hasn't there been any organised public meetings, or rallies opposing the cuts across the entire education and tertiary sector?”

The student urged everyone to participate in the joint online public meeting of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and IYSSE on Saturday, July 17 at 4 p.m.: “Oppose the job cuts at Macquarie University! Build rank-and-file committees to defend public education!”

“Students have started a petition fighting to oppose the sacking of a mathematics lecturer,” he explained. “The issue is that we have to mobilise students and staff against all of these cuts, not just at Macquarie but across all of the campuses.”

The NTEU meeting, attended by some 70 people, had attempted to shore up support for enterprise bargaining. That is the system through which all the trade unions have suppressed industrial action and struck deals with individual employers, over the past three decades. This has facilitated a corporate-government offensive on workers' conditions, including the increasing pro-business restructuring of public universities.

The IYSSE member was abruptly interrupted midway

through his contribution by NTEU industrial officer Samantha Ramsay. She declared: “I understand the level of frustration that comes from staff who believe that these cuts have been essentially endorsed by the enterprise agreement, or have been allowed by the enterprise agreement.” She claimed that “if we existed without an enterprise agreement (EA), what would have happened to us would have been worse.”

In reality, the enterprise bargaining regime, first imposed by the Keating Labor Party government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) in the 1990s, has split workers into isolated workplaces and tied them to the revenue and profit requirements of “their” employers, while outlawing all industrial action outside “bargaining periods” for such EAs.

In an attempt to answer the IYSSE member, NTEU Newcastle branch vice-president Terence Summers stated: “The problem is we have the most draconian labour laws in the Western world... Protest if you can, but if you protest in a workplace, you are thrown into jail. If you disrupt work, you will be fined and thrown in jail.”

But what Summers and union officials never mention is that all the unions backed the imposition of these anti-strike laws in the 1990s, and their reinforcement by the Fair Work Act introduced by the Rudd Labor government in 2009. In fact, the unions helped draft these laws, precisely to enforce their role as an industrial police force over the working class.

Towards the end of the meeting, the IYSSE member posted in the chat: “A new EA won’t change anything ... the changes and the sackings work in the framework of the EA. That has been the case for the past 3 decades.”

Ramsay stated: “Yes, those things may be partially true.” But she claimed: “The EA has a large number of conditions, and they are really great, and we can use it to make changes at the university.”

The NTEU is anxiously seeking to seal another three-year EA deal with management, nervous that its role in policing unprecedented job and pay cuts over the past 18 months has produced pent-up anger, which it is no longer able to contain.

In one indication of what is to come, the union reported that UoN management is proposing a six-week teaching block model. Such short courses are designed to further subordinate higher education to the

vocational demands of employers.

The combined IYSSE-CFPE public meeting on July 17 will call for the establishment of a network of joint rank-and-file committees of university staff and students, completely independent of the unions. This will provide a means by which they can carry out a nationwide, unified fight against the gutting of jobs and conditions, and link up with students, educators and all workers internationally, who face similar struggles.

This requires a struggle against the capitalist profit system itself, and the turn to a socialist perspective, to reorganise society on the basis of social need, not private wealth accumulation. To participate in the joint online public meeting register [here](#).



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