

# Defeated management “offer” at Western Sydney University reveals intensifying attack on educators

Our correspondent  
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Developments at Western Sydney University (WSU) provide another warning of how governments and managements are exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic to deepen their offensive against educators, and how this historic assault is being facilitated by the trade unions.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) moved an urgent resolution at a National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members’ meeting at the university last Friday calling for the formation of rank-and-file committees to fight the deepening attack on jobs, wages and conditions. But NTEU branch officials delayed the moving of the resolution until the final five minutes of the meeting, leaving no time for genuine debate.

Only about 80 members joined the online meeting, which was billed as a report back on five fortnightly “enterprise bargaining” sessions between the NTEU and WSU management. That is a small fraction of WSU’s staff, which exceeds 3,000, despite hundreds of job cuts last year.

Across Australia, the union is trying to corral university workers into another round of three-year enterprise agreements (EAs). These have been a decades-long vehicle for unions to isolate workers, workplace by workplace, and impose pro-business restructuring, enforced by anti-strike laws.

A few days earlier, the union had reported that staff at WSU College, a wholly-owned WSU subsidiary, voted overwhelmingly, by 78 percent, against a non-union EA which demanded a real pay cut—a rise of just 1.25 percent per year over three years—and the continuation of gross systemic underpayment of casual educators.

Adjusted for inflation as currently forecast by the Reserve Bank of Australia, this would be a real salary cut of more than 2 percent over the life of the agreement. And by its own admission, management would have saved \$2-3 million over three years by compelling casual teachers to do excessive marking. Some casuals are paid nothing for most of the

marking they do.

The NTEU’s response to the vote result was to appeal for further backroom talks with management, both at the WSU College and the university as a whole, which is covered by a separate “enterprise bargaining” process. In effect, the union is offering to work more closely with management to achieve its further cost-cutting demands, while continuing to oppose any unified national struggle by university workers and students against the onslaught.

In an email to members, the NTEU said the vote would “force College Management back to the bargaining table to negotiate a decent pay offer, and to find a decent outcome on the vexed issue of underpayment for casual marking... the College result also puts the spotlight on the need for the University to offer a decent pay rise to *everyone*.”

The email concluded: “Thanks to the sacrifices of staff over this exhausting time, WSU has had a good last eighteen months, and the University can well afford to distribute fairly the fruits of that good fortune.”

The NTEU’s celebration of the management’s “good fortune” typifies the union’s collaboration with the employers at each university around the country. Numbers of institutions have reported surpluses, even as they intensify their cuts and pro-business restructuring, at the expense of both staff and students, who face the loss of course options, educators and thesis supervisors.

During 2020, WSU reported a surplus of almost \$70 million, despite the loss of some international student revenue due to the pandemic. That was achieved by the cost-cutting “sacrifices”—job cuts, larger class sizes and increased workloads—extracted from the staff, with the assistance of the NTEU.

Last year, the union bulldozed a variation in its existing EA through a members’ meeting to permit the “sacrifices,” while vehemently opposing calls by CFPE members for a nationwide fight against the similar attacks taking place everywhere.

The NTEU's role was exemplified at Friday's meeting, where the union branch president David Burchell said that "peace and love" had broken out with the management last year, after the vice-chancellor "fell in love with unions again."

As if to celebrate this partnership, Burchell said the union branch had also "come out of 2020 well." He boasted that all the redundancies at WSU were "technically voluntary."

In other words, as at other universities, the NTEU worked with management to suppress outrage and opposition among university workers by depicting the job losses as "voluntary" and covering up the reality of coerced departures and greater workloads for remaining staff.

Burchell also tried to play down the implications of the brutal proposed management EA at the WSU College. Burchell said the management "offer" must have been issued at the direction of the vice-chancellor, yet he denied that any "concerted agenda" lay behind it.

In reality, the pay-cutting demand is part of a further national offensive. In response to questions, senior NTEU industrial officer Josh Gava revealed at the meeting that managements at other universities, such as Deakin, had proposed similar real wage cuts. At the same time, hundreds more job cuts are being announced virtually every week, including recently at La Trobe, Monash, Adelaide, Macquarie and the University of Western Australia. This is on top of up to 90,000 job losses last year, counting casuals.

The resolution moved by CFPE members called for "a unified struggle by university staff and students against the offensive by government and management, who are exploiting the worsening global COVID-19 disaster to accelerate years of the transformation of universities into increasingly casualised businesses, servicing the narrow vocational and research requirements of the corporate elite, at the expense of genuine education. The continued pandemic crisis has resulted from the capitalist drive to reopen the economy and is not the fault of educators, who should not be made to pay for it."

It concluded with a call for "the establishment of rank-and-file action committees of tertiary education workers and students—independent of the NTEU, governments and employers. These are essential to (1) organise a unified struggle against the destruction of jobs and basic rights, (2) protect university staff and students from unsafe COVID-19 conditions and (3) link up with workers internationally who are facing similar critical struggles against the impact of the worsening global capitalist crisis."

Moving the resolution, long-standing WSU educator and CFPE member Michael Head said educators and students faced "a double-barrelled political and public health crisis of historic proportions around the globe." The first barrel was

the Delta pandemic, "worsened by the refusal of capitalist governments everywhere to take the necessary safety measures and their rush to lift restrictions for the sake of corporate profit."

The second barrel was "the exploitation of the pandemic crisis by the same governments and ruling classes to carry through massive cuts to the wages and conditions of workers, and radically restructure economic and social life, including in universities, in the interests of big business and the super-rich."

"That is why we have moved the resolution. We must mobilise urgently against this double-barrelled assault. We must break out of the siloing and isolation imposed by the unions and the anti-strike laws that they imposed via the enterprise bargaining regime inflicted on us by the Keating Labor government and the unions in the 1990s."

Seconding the motion, WSU College educator Gabriela Zabala warned: "What is being demanded at the College is what will be and is being demanded across the entire university sector as a whole." She said the NTEU was using enterprise bargaining to "suppress resistance to the attacks on jobs and conditions."

Zabala said the government-management offensive was also built on the platform provided by the last Greens-backed Labor government's "education revolution" that has forced universities to compete against each for enrolments.

Growing numbers of WSU students and staff, many of whom come from Sydney's most-affected western and southwestern suburbs, are being infected by the Delta virus. Vice-chancellor Barney Glover reported last Thursday that the university had been notified of 27 locally-acquired positive cases since August 3, taking the total numbers to 55 domestic students, 36 students offshore and 4 staff.

This highlights the rising dangers confronting young people, especially in working class areas, from the profit-driven "reopening" policies of the corporate elite and governments.

To discuss the formation of rank-and-file committees, we urge educators and students to contact the CFPE.

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation/>

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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