

Australian tertiary education union bars post-grad members from Newcastle University meeting

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Across Australia, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is preparing a new round of sellouts to jobs and conditions. A warning of this came at the University of Newcastle (UoN), in the industrial city around 175 kilometres north of Sydney.

In an anti-democratic move, NTEU postgraduate members and non-union members were excluded from a meeting on August 5 where members voted on the union branch's log of claims for a yet another enterprise agreement with management.

A Committee for Public Education (CFPE) member, a postgraduate member of the NTEU, was told just 15 minutes before the meeting that his registration for it had been cancelled. The post-graduate student had intended to oppose the log of claims and propose an alternative resolution.

When the student member challenged this censorship and demanded an explanation, NTEU Newcastle branch president Daniel Conway said in an August 7 email that the meeting "was called for eligible ordinary voting members to vote on the Branch log of claims. Only Ordinary members ... who were eligible to vote from the membership were able to attend."

"Unfortunately as you are a Postgraduate member you are not a financial member and under the rules you were not eligible to vote at the meeting... We had a number of other non-financial members who registered from UON staff also so we had to cancel their registrations also."

Conway referred to an unspecified 'Rule 9.4: "Postgraduate Members are not members of the union, and shall not be eligible to ... otherwise exercise any rights of members of the union.'

In other words, postgraduate members are not

"members." Other staff who were not NTEU were excluded even though they will be impacted by the enterprise agreement. The move purposefully divides NTEU members from students and other staff.

In reply, the CFPE member asked Conway a series of questions: "Why were we only told at the very last minute that we weren't able to attend the meeting? Isn't this discrimination against post-graduate members of the NTEU? Why are we defined as non-members?"

"This rule that you cite, what rule is it? Is it a national rule or one that was adopted for the NTEU local branch? When was it adopted? How many others were excluded from the meeting?"

"Why would you exclude people from the meeting who will be impacted by the upcoming EBA? Why is the union sowing a division between educators and post-graduate student members?"

Conway has not yet replied.

Damien Cahill, the New South Wales (NSW) NTEU Division Secretary, attended the UoN meeting. He declared on twitter that it was "an excellent meeting" with "over 100 @NTEUNSW members @Uni_Newcastle, endorsing the union's campaign for a new enterprise agreement."

That is only a fraction of the university's staff. Cahill did not mention the exclusion of student members.

This is not an isolated incident. The NTEU's anti-democratic methods went further on August 6 at a New South Wales statewide online "forum" to push its enterprise bargaining plans. Despite the event being billed as a forum, NTEU members were prevented from speaking, and the chat function was disabled, making it impossible for participants to communicate with each other.

The union's officials are aware that the NTEU is increasingly discredited in the eyes of university workers because of its role in suppressing opposition to historic cuts to jobs and conditions, which saw up to 90,000 jobs eliminated nationwide last year.

The union is promoting the fraudulent claim that the ongoing assault can be reversed through the enterprise bargaining framework. Yet, this has been the central mechanism over the past three decades by which unions have isolated workers to different workplaces and imposed pro-corporate cuts and restructuring.

Introduced by the Keating Labor government, working hand-in-glove with the unions in the early 1990s, this regime was later reinforced by draconian anti-strike legislation, the Fair Work Act, introduced in 2009 by the Rudd Labor government, again in collaboration with the unions.

Jenny Whittard, the NTEU Newcastle branch organiser, later declared that the August 5 meeting had rejected growing job insecurity, workload intensification and cost cutting, and endorsed the log of claims.

However, the union's claims are deliberately vague, designed to deepen the partnership between the NTEU and management.

Under "Job Security," the document states: "that retrenchment, including voluntary retrenchment, only occur where the work performed in the position is no longer required to be performed by anyone."

In other words, if management deems that a job position is "no longer required" it can impose sackings in line with the cost-cutting and corporate restructuring demands of the federal government and big business.

At UoN, over 200 FTE academic and professional staff have lost or are in the process of losing their jobs. A restructure that led to the amalgamation of 530 of the university's 2,200 courses has proceeded unimpeded.

The NTEU has opposed any mobilisation against the cuts and restructuring, which were carried out via the current enterprise agreement, signed in 2018. At the same time, the union has opposed any unified nationwide struggle against the government-management offensive.

Other "key claims" include: "a right to conversion to permanent employment after two years' continuous service for contingent staff and fixed term staff." There is no detail as to how this transition would be achieved,

let alone any demand for the basic right of all educators to secure permanent jobs.

Another vague claim is for "protections against excessive, unreasonable or uncompensated overtime." There is no definition of "excessive" or "unreasonable" nor any indication of what kind of "protections" would exist.

The CFPE is fighting for the establishment of a network of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to unify educators, all education staff and students against the cuts, and to link up with workers nationally and internationally facing similar critical struggles against the impact of the worsening global capitalist crisis.

The CFPE member was blocked from moving a resolution that rejects the management-union enterprise bargaining process as nothing but a decades-old vehicle for imposing further pro-business restructuring and cuts to jobs and conditions at universities across the country.

The resolution gives full support to the campaign taken up by students against the retrenchment of much-appreciated educators and devastating course cuts at universities across the country, including Macquarie, Monash, La Trobe, Adelaide and the University of Western Australia.

It calls for a unified struggle by university staff and students against the offensive by government and management, which 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.

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

Facebook:

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

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Twitter: https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia



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