

Australian university union holds back industrial action

Our correspondents
15 December 2021

Despite overwhelming votes at some universities for strike action over pay and conditions, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is keeping workplaces isolated and delaying action until some time in 2022.

The votes for industrial action reflect the anger and disgust that has built up over the past two years as managements, backed by governments, continue to exploit the COVID pandemic to eliminate tens of thousands of jobs, further casualise the workforce and accelerate the pro-business restructuring of tertiary education.

Throughout 2021, the NTEU has insisted that a new round of enterprise bargaining at individual universities across the country provides the only legal means of addressing the carnage inflicted on university staff and students. Time and again, NTEU officials have told members' meetings that no industrial action can be taken, outside enterprise bargaining periods, because of the anti-strike Fair Work Act—which was introduced by the last federal Labor government of 2007 to 2013 with the full backing of all the trade unions.

In recent months, however, the union has further held back any action, even under the enterprise bargaining framework. It is holding interminable backroom enterprise agreement (EA) negotiations with the same managements that have inflicted the unprecedented job cuts, course closures and corporate restructuring.

The union's role was epitomised by developments this month at Western Sydney University (WSU) and the University of Sydney (USyd).

At WSU, union members at WSU College, a profit-making feeder college, voted overwhelming for strike action in a formal "Protected Action Ballot." The ballot was finally held months after they strongly rejected a management agreement that offered only a 1 percent

per year pay rise—a real wage cut given the rising level of inflation.

The NTEU reported that 91.5 percent of its WSU College members voted in the ballot, with 96 percent of voting members endorsing strike action of up to 24 hours' duration. Significantly, that endorsement was higher than for lesser forms of industrial action.

Rather than calling a strike immediately, at a time when it would have seriously affected the management's end-of-year results processing, the NTEU said it would keep the various "agreed actions" open for use in the New Year. It again cited the requirements of the Fair Work Act, which contain a series of mechanisms for managements and governments to halt strikes even after workers have voted for them.

At the same time, the NTEU was holding back action by workers at WSU itself. They are covered by a separate EA, thus preventing a unified struggle against the management, even within the one university.

At a WSU NTEU branch meeting on December 2, the union reported that despite mostly "cordial" meetings with management, no progress had been made on the union's "central claims" around "job security" and "workload processes."

Nevertheless, industrial action would be put off until after February at least, thus leaving the WSU College workers to fight on their own.

The union's resolution, adopted by the meeting, stated: "The bargaining team will report back to members before the end of February 2022 with a view to seeking a Protected Action Ballot if resolution of these key matters is not imminent."

Among the issues on which the NTEU said there was no progress or "actually going backwards" were: "Redundancy only when the work (rather than simply

the position) is no longer required,” “No more than one change process affecting a staff member’s employment in the course of an EA” and “Pay (Management has not advanced on its offer of 1.6 percent x 3, which equates to 1.4 percent p.a. from end of Agreement to end of Agreement).”

These redundancy and “change process” requests, contained in the NTEU’s log of claims, open the door for further job losses. There is no demand for no more redundancies, let alone for the reinstatement of the hundreds of jobs, both permanent and casual, destroyed at WSU over the past 18 months.

For the management to balk at even the most minimal limit on its right to scrap jobs is a warning that it is preparing further offensives, and counting on the union to keep blocking any unified opposition at WSU and across the universities nationally.

After obtaining a vote for its resolution, the union branch officials shut down the December 2 meeting, preventing any discussion on an opposed resolution moved by Socialist Equality Party supporters, which called for breaking out of the management-union “enterprise bargaining” straitjacket.

That resolution called for the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the NTEU, to organise a “unified industrial and political struggle by university staff and students against the offensive by governments and managements.”

During the meeting, NTEU branch president David Burchell denounced Mike Head, a long-time educator and SEP member, for supposedly “posturing” by advancing such a proposal and “abrogating” responsibility for staff members for the sake of “revolution.”

Burchell’s declaration not only demonstrated the union bureaucracy’s fear of opposition and utter contempt for democratic discussion. It exposed the real concern within the union hierarchy that workers will break out of the NTEU’s increasingly discredited grip and turn toward the genuine socialist alternative fought for by the SEP.

Similarly, the union leadership at USyd refused, despite objections, to read out a parallel SEP-supported resolution at a meeting on the same day. The union also postponed the holding of a Protected Action Ballot until 2022.

That was despite the NTEU reporting that the

management was still intent on scrapping the traditional 40-40-20 (teaching/research/administration) workload model for academics. This is part of what the union earlier described as a “scorched earth” policy to focus on teaching and research that “brings in the dollars.”

As these meetings show, the union is continuing down the road it took in May 2020 when it provoked outrage among university workers by proposing a supposed “Job Protection Framework” to allow university managements nationally to cut wages by up to 15 percent, while still eliminating “at least 12,000 jobs.”

When many university employers rejected this national framework, worried that the NTEU could not enforce it, the union proceeded to strike deals that contained similar cuts, with individual managements. That has paved the way for an avalanche of job cuts that is still deepening around the country, including at Sydney’s Macquarie University.

The NTEU’s role is all the more cynical because it is encouraging university workers to believe that a Labor Party-led government would lessen the assault on them if it were elected at the looming federal election.

But the last Labor government, backed by the Greens, laid the foundations, via its “education revolution,” for the destruction of higher education. For this election, Labor has promised only to fund “up to” 20,000 extra university places over two years, all in vocational disciplines tied to the requirements of employers.



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