

Australian university union helps managements drag out industrial bargaining

Mike Head
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Without any explanation to its members, the main trade union covering Australian universities this month announced a prolonged delay in striking enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs) with campus managements.

In the March edition of *Advocate*, a National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) online magazine, NTEU national secretary Matthew McGowan revealed: “Our goal is to get 60% of agreements across the sector finalised or near finalisation by the end of the year.”

That means continuing to allow the employers to stall the supposed bargaining process, in many cases until 2023. That is long after most of the existing three-year management-union EBAs at individual universities have already expired. Some ended last June—nine months ago.

In effect, while inflation is soaring, further slashing the real wages of university staff, like all workers, a wage freeze is being imposed, helping the employers boost their surpluses at workers’ expense.

Having suppressed university workers’ opposition to the unprecedented destruction of tens of thousands of jobs over the past two years, and to the forced return to unsafe campuses amid the resurging COVID-19 pandemic, the NTEU is now further holding back any industrial action, even within the narrow confines of the EBA regime.

This also means keeping university workers siloed behind individual EBA negotiations, when what is required is a unified struggle to reverse the assault on jobs and conditions, and to oppose the life-threatening pandemic conditions in which hundreds of infections have been reported among staff and students.

When members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) asked at three NTEU branch meetings last week, at University

of Sydney, Western Sydney University and University of Newcastle, why the union was helping managements to drag out the EBA process long after previous agreements had expired, no answers were provided.

Union officials said managements were stalling, but nothing could be done, except to apply to the government’s Fair Work Australia industrial tribunal for ballots to allow “protected” industrial action. They vehemently opposed calls by the SEP and CFPE for a unified national fight against the ongoing decimation of jobs, wages and conditions.

As they have since the 1990s, the union representatives insisted that any such struggle would be illegal under the industrial laws. But the unions themselves imposed these “enterprise bargaining” and “Fair Work” laws on their members during the Hawke-Keating and Rudd-Gillard Labor governments.

Nor were there any answers to questions about why the union was stifling resistance to staff and students being pushed back onto campuses and into face to face classes, without even masks, while managements cover up the true extent of COVID infections, often stopping reporting cases.

The SEP and CFPE members pointed out that lengthy weekly lists of infection locations existed at the University of Sydney and Macquarie University, but managements at all campuses were doing everything possible to hide outbreaks. That was even after nearly 700 students were infected in one week at the Australian National University and large clusters have broken out in secondary and primary schools all over the country.

These developments point to a deep crisis in the NTEU, which is haemorrhaging members and rank-and-file support. In response, it has been seeking to intensify its partnership with the employers throughout

the pandemic. As soon as COVID-19 struck in 2020, the NTEU volunteered massive job and pay cuts to the employers in a “national framework,” but faced a rebellion by members that essentially scuttled the deal.

The NTEU then proceeded to push sacrifices of jobs and conditions through agreements with individual universities, while stifling opposition by its members. This created the conditions for the destruction of at least 35,000 jobs by May 2021, and many more since then.

In his *Advocate* article, McGowan admitted that university workers are outraged at what has happened, and want to fight back. “Staff in the sector have a right to feel let-down and angry as many managements used the staff cuts of the past 2 years to bolster their balance sheets,” he wrote. “With real wages declining in an environment of rising inflation, staff are going to demand better from university managements.”

McGowan claimed: “With strong member support, we will not accept management delays and obfuscation.” In reality, the union’s response is to try to keep a lid on the widespread discontent throughout 2022, and channel it back into the same EBA straitjacket that the unions have used for three decades to tie workers to the profit requirements of employers.

“Over the last year, delegates, members and elected officials have been talking with members and non-members, building greater understanding of why the bargaining process is so important,” McGowan wrote. This “bargaining process,” featuring month after month of backroom negotiations between union and management executives, is in fact the main mechanism for preventing an eruption of opposition.

McGowan appealed for more members to get “active” to show “university management that NTEU has the support of staff.” However, the union meetings have remained small, reflecting the impact of the increasingly bitter experiences with the union.

By holding back its members, the NTEU is also trying to smooth the way for the return of a Labor Party-led government at the federal election due in May. Together with Labor, the union bureaucrats fear any working-class upsurge that could get out of their control and shatter the capacity of a Labor government to enforce the even deeper offensive on jobs and conditions demanded by the corporate elite under conditions of pandemic and war.

The NTEU somehow hopes that university workers have forgotten that the last Labor government of Rudd and Gillard, from 2007 to 2013, laid the foundations for the intensifying assault on university workers and students via its “demand-driven” funding system and multi-billion dollar cuts.

Labor also has played the central role, through the “National Cabinet,” in scrapping virtually all pandemic safety measures, creating the conditions for the Omicron disaster, including the rapid spread of the even more transmissible and vaccine-evading BA.2 mutation.

McGowan wrote: “Let’s hope 2022 gets rid of one virus at least—the current Federal Government.” Far from fighting for the elimination of COVID, the union is promoting Labor, which fully agrees with the deadly profit-driven “live with the virus” program of the corporate elite.

It is time for lessons to be drawn from these developments. The NTEU and other unions do not represent the interests of workers. They function as pro-Labor and pro-management industrial police forces over their members, and the working class as a whole.

SEP and CFPE members are urging staff and students to form independent rank-and-file committees to oppose the NTEU and union apparatuses, and link up with the educators’ strikes, student walkouts and protests internationally against the global pandemic catastrophe and the worldwide employer offensive on jobs and conditions. For discussion contact the CFPE.

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