Australian university union claims a sham "historic win"

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2 August 2022

If one were to believe Australia's National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the corporate media, the trade union covering university workers has won an "historic" agreement at Western Sydney University (WSU) that sets a lead across the country.

Supposedly, the sketchy three-page "heads of agreement" struck between the NTEU and the university's management contains "the biggest one-off reduction in casualisation ever seen in an enterprise agreement in the higher education sector," as well as acceptable pay rises.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, the deal provides for essentially empty promises of opportunities for some casual academics to apply for full-time jobs, as well as for wage increases far below the soaring cost of living.

The WSU management was obviously well pleased with the outcome, which was also reached with the Community and Public Sector Union that covers professional staff. "The university thanks both unions for their constructive engagement in the bargaining process to date and believe the outcome provides good, well-deserved and fair improvements in conditions for staff," it said.

The NTEU's boasting of this big "WIN" smacks of desperation. The union has been increasingly discredited by its record of sellouts, taken to a new level during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, when it volunteered thousands of job cuts and wage reductions of up to 15 percent. The NTEU is anxious to claim a victory to head off rank-and-file disaffection.

At the same time, like every other Australian trade union, the NTEU is committed to imposing outcomes on its members that are in line with the "tough medicine" austerity demands of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's Labor government. That includes keeping annual pay rises below the 3.5 percent limit demanded by the Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA), despite inflation soaring to near 8 percent.

Before NTEU members had even heard of the supposed triumph at WSU, the news was promoted by the *Australian*, the Murdoch media's national flagship. That was courtesy of comments by Damien Cahill, the union's New South Wales state secretary, who is also the NTEU leadership's candidate for national secretary in forthcoming union elections.

"Western Sydney University is on the verge of signing a 'historic' union agreement to move 25 percent of its casual workforce into permanent jobs," the newspaper reported misleadingly on July 27.

"It's an historic agreement," Cahill told the *Australian*. "I think other NTEU branches will be looking to campaign for similar improvements at their own universities."

Yet, as the article itself indicated, the proposed enterprise agreement permits management to pick and choose who, if any, of its many casuals will fill a full-time vacancy. The agreement would merely "give the university's casual academic staff first preference in applying for about 150 full-time equivalent teaching and research positions over the next two and a half years."

Over the past decade, universities have become some of the most casualised workplaces in the country. That is primarily a result of the last Labor government's "education revolution" which turned higher education into a marketplace, with universities competing against each other for enrolments, while slashing costs to boost surpluses.

Cahill told the *Australian* that 160,000 workers in higher education—over two-thirds of the total—are employed as casuals or on short-term contracts. But the NTEU has helped impose this disaster by working with managements to tie university workers to one enterprise agreement after the other that has permitted casualisation.

A closer look at the NTEU's three-page "heads of agreement" with WSU shows that it gives management ample leeway to continue denying secure employment to most of its academic workforce. After axing some 400 full-time jobs during the pandemic so far, management said it would open 150 "full-time equivalent" positions by June 2025, but "with regard for the need for flexibility in 2024 relative to budget challenges."

An associated two-page "agreed clauses" document reveals that casuals are far from guaranteed any of the 150 supposedly new jobs. "Existing WSU casuals will have first right to apply for these jobs," it states. "If there are not enough appointable internal applicants, positions will be made available to current or recent casuals from other Australian institutions."

In other words, management retains the prerogative to decide whether casuals are "appointable."

Equally vaguely, the "heads of agreement" says: "There will be a commitment to a 25 percent reduction in the proportion of the casual workforce to the total academic workforce by end of Agreement"—that is in 2025.

As the "starting point" for this reduction, the agreement takes data from March 2021, that is after the university, together with all the other public universities, had destroyed tens of thousands of jobs in the first year of the pandemic.

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In truth, the NTEU's "casual conversion package" is designed to cost the management only a fraction of the surpluses that it has extracted from its workforce during the pandemic. In a June 23 email to members, NTEU branch president David Burchell emphasised that "the total agreed cost of the casual conversion package is around $7.5 million over three years—about one-twentieth of this year's surplus ($143 million)."

Far from championing the rights of casuals, the agreement also involves the union withdrawing claims for 17 percent employer superannuation contributions and paid sick leave for casual employees.

Cuts to real wages and conditions

Likewise on wages, Cahill told the *Australian* that the proposed enterprise agreement with WSU would deliver staff a total pay rise of 4.6 percent this year, and additional increases to lower-paid staff that would take their pay rise up to 6.4 percent. This would be followed by a 3.35 percent increase in October 2023, a 2.9 percent increase in October 2024 and a 2.6 percent increase in October 2025.

Over the more than four years since the last pay rise at WSU in 2021, that averages out at around the 3.5 percent cap demanded by RBA governor Philip Lowe, backed by the Labor government. Yet Treasurer Jim Chalmers last week said the official Consumer Price Index—which itself understates the costs of "non-discretionary" spending for working class households—would be 7.75 percent by December.

Delivering the Labor government's first economic statement to parliament last week, Chalmers declared that working people would have to swallow "tough medicine," including further real wage cuts, to pay for the national debt accrued through business handouts and massive military spending. The WSU-NTEU deal is part of what he called "pain."

Like the casuals package, the pay deal is calculated to cost WSU only a small fraction of its surplus. In a May 27 email to members, Burchell had said an annual pay rise of 3.5 percent would cost the university around $16.6 million, "not much more than a tenth of the operating surplus."

At that time, Burchell said management was being miserly by only originally offering less but added: "This University deserves prudent financial administration." That sums up the NTEU's partnership with the employers, focussed on ensuring that they remain competitive on the education market.

In a July 26 email sent to all NTEU members in NSW announcing an August forum to discuss the big "WIN," Cahill also claimed that the deal provided "real restructure protections."

The "agreed clauses," however, specify that the only "protection" is that "an Employee will not be subject to more than one organisational change process that may result in the termination of the Employee's employment on the ground of redundancy."

Even that token limitation "will not apply to any form of voluntary separation, including calls for expressions of interest in voluntary redundancy." That is, management is free to use its well-known methods of pressuring workers into taking supposed "voluntary redundancies," which the NTEU has long supported as a means of heading off opposition to mass sackings.

Moreover, all this is "subject to any exceptional circumstances that may arise (including substantial adverse changes in Government funding or major negative economic disruption)." Thus, the way is open for further tidal waves of sackings as occurred in 2020-21, particularly as the Labor government cites "global challenges" to justify inflicting deeper budget cuts.

Similar language exists throughout the documents, leaving power in the hands of management on every issue, including in clauses about working from home, protection from "infectious diseases" (COVID-19 is not even mentioned!) and "flexible hours of work."

The "heads of agreement" also increases academic workloads by raising the maximum hours of marking per semester from 135 to 150, while reducing the maximum teaching hours from 13 to 12 per week, and by allowing research time to be cut to 20 percent of workloads, whereas the previous 2017 agreement provided for at least 12 weeks of sustained research time per year.

The NTEU's "historic WIN" is a recipe for a further erosion of wages and working conditions, dovetailing with the Labor government's pro-business agenda, which includes further restructuring universities to satisfy the vocational and research demands of the corporate elite and the US-aligned military-intelligence establishment.

We urge WSU staff to not only oppose the agreement when it is eventually released and put to a ballot, but to make a break from the NTEU and CPSU by forming independent rank-and-file committees to reach out to fellow workers for a unified struggle for a free, first-class education system based on social need, not business profits and war preparations.

For discussion contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE).

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