

# Australian university union's “historic win” now a “grand compromise”

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Australia's National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is sending its members frequent emails urging them to attend a “webinar” next Friday to proclaim a supposed “Historic WIN” at Western Sydney University (WSU) and discuss how to spread it to other campuses.

The union's claim of a great victory, however, has been undermined by one of its own representatives, who boasted to the corporate media that the deal struck by the NTEU with the WSU management represents a “grand compromise.”

The author of the “historic WIN” emails is NTEU New South Wales state secretary Damien Cahill, who is also the union leadership's candidate for national secretary in current elections. He insists that a sketchy three-page “heads of agreement” at WSU contains “the biggest one-off reduction in casualisation ever seen in an enterprise agreement in the higher education sector,” as well as generous pay rises.

But the NTEU branch president at WSU, David Burchell, joined hands with WSU vice chancellor Barney Glover last week to hail the deal as a precedent-setting sacrifice of wages in return for alleged job opportunities for casual academics.

The pair told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) it was a “seismic shift” in industrial relations, similar to the notorious “Job Protection Framework” that the NTEU tried unsuccessfully to impose on university workers nationally in 2020 during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In that 2020 betrayal, the NTEU volunteered to the university vice chancellors, behind the backs of university workers, wage cuts of up to 15 percent and at least 18,000 job cuts on the pretext of preventing an even greater tsunami of job destruction.

When outraged NTEU members and other university

workers rejected this blatant national sellout, the union nevertheless proceeded to impose similar packages of salary and job sacrifices at individual universities, such as WSU, while vehemently opposing any unified struggle against the avalanche of cuts.

Profiting directly from the resulting cuts to wages and jobs, most managements recorded hefty surpluses in 2021. That included \$143 million at WSU, up from \$22 million in 2020, on the back of culling more than 400 jobs.

Now, the NTEU is championing a new version of this partnership with the employers in order to meet their demands, and those of the Labor government, for wage rises far below the soaring cost of living, that is, for further real wage cuts.

“At Western Sydney something strange and remarkable happened during 2020, the first year of COVID,” Burchell told the ABC.

“The union and the vice-chancellor, Barney Glover, came together to craft amendments to the enterprise agreements which protected casual pay and ongoing jobs in return for a salary sacrifice in case the university's finances hit the wall.

“Then both sides kept talking to each other—but now about how to engineer a similar grand compromise to attack the university's financial reliance on casuals...

“Management and staff have agreed to share the cost—some comes off the salary increase in the agreements, and some from management savings.”

Glover was equally enthusiastic. “I hope other universities look at this scheme and give it consideration,” he told the ABC.

The ABC reported: “It wasn't easy. A significant number of the union's permanent staff were initially sceptical of trading away some of their own salary increase to deal with what they saw as management's

problem.

“But after two years of negotiations, management and full-time staff have traded off pay rises in order to allow more casual staff a pathway to secure work where they can plan their futures.”

The truth is that no WSU staff members have yet seen the proposed enterprise agreement, let alone voted for it in a postal ballot, as required.

And the claim that the “heads of agreement” is an historic gain for casuals is totally bogus. As a previous WSWS article documented, the deal provides for essentially empty promises of opportunities for some casual academics to apply for full-time jobs, as well as for real wage cuts over the next four years.

The proposed enterprise agreement would permit management to pick and choose who, if any, of its many casuals would fill a full-time vacancy. The deal would merely give the university’s casual academics first preference in applying for about 150 full-time equivalent teaching and research positions over the next two and a half years.

“If there are not enough appointable internal applicants, positions will be made available to current or recent casuals from other Australian institutions,” the document states. In other words, management retains the prerogative to decide whether casuals are “appointable.”

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.

Likewise on wages, over four years the rises average out at around the 3.5 percent cap demanded by the Reserve Bank of Australia, backed by the Labor government. That is less than half the 7.75 percent inflation rate officially expected by December.

The comments by Burchell and Glover to the ABC underscore the warning made by the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), a rank-and-file educators’ committee, that the so-called historic win at WSU is a recipe for a further joint assault on wages and working conditions by the employers and the NTEU.

This fits 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.

The CFPE urges WSU staff to oppose the agreement when it is eventually released and put to a ballot, and to call for support from all university workers and students. That means making a break from the NTEU to form independent rank-and-file committees to reach out to fellow workers for a unified struggle to reverse all the job cuts and 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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