

# Australia: University of Newcastle staff to strike for 24 hours

**John Harris****19 September 2022**

University of Newcastle (UoN) workers are stopping work for 24 hours tomorrow over poor pay and working conditions. It is the first strike since 2018 at the university, in the industrial city north of Sydney.

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which covers the staff, is seeking a new enterprise agreement with university management. The former agreement expired a year ago, in September 2021.

The stoppage was voted for at a membership meeting on September 8. That followed a protected action ballot vote by an overwhelming 97 percent to take industrial action, with some 92 percent voting for a 24-hour strike. A further 24-hour strike has been authorised at a date that is yet to be determined if no agreement can be made between the NTEU and management by Friday.

Despite weeks of negotiations, management is offering only a 6 percent pay rise over three years, which would mean a 2 percent pay rise per annum, a huge real wage cut when inflation is predicted to be 7.75 percent by the end of this year.

In June, NTEU branch president Dan Conway proposed a 15 percent pay rise over three years, also well below the inflation rate, and even further behind the real increases in the cost of living.

The strike votes demonstrate the readiness of workers to fight for decent pay and conditions. It also reflects the wider intent of university staff to oppose the wholesale destruction of jobs and conditions, which the NTEU has permitted, especially since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the University of Sydney, members have voted 92 percent in favour of going on strike for the fourth time this year. The majority voted to make it a two-day strike on October 13 and 14.

University of Queensland workers voted by 93 percent to take one-day strikes and stopped work on September 1. Staff at Griffith University, James Cook University and Queensland University of Technology have voted to seek protected action ballots, which are required to take industrial action under the draconian Fair Work Act laws adopted by

the last Labor government, backed by the unions, in 2009.

The aim of the NTEU, however, is to keep isolating workers, university-by-university, and wear them down through ineffectual one- or two-day strikes. It has opposed calls by members of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) for a unified struggle against the onslaught on jobs and conditions, which is continuing under the current Labor government.

At UoN, the management is demanding the introduction of a new employment category called "Academic Periodic Employment," which is essentially a casual staff position without the 25 percent casual loading.

Management is also pushing for the 25 days of annual leave to be split into "sick and carers" leave of 15 days and "life leave" of 10 days. Life leave would not accrue year-on-year, potentially limiting the amount of leave staff members can take.

In an interview with the Newcastle Herald last week, Conway said, "what we are seeking aren't crazy leftist demands as they are sometimes portrayed... we have accommodated many of management's requirements in the interests of achieving agreement."

In other words, the union is continuing to trade off workers' conditions to meet the management's demands, as the NTEU has done for decades. This accommodation to management has intensified since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the NTEU nationally offered to accept thousands of job cuts and wage cuts of up to 15 percent.

The union's log of claims is deliberately vague. Under the section "job security," it demands that "redundancy only occurs when the work is no longer required to be performed by anyone." This is effectively giving management its blessing to cut jobs that are "no longer required" in line with the ongoing corporate restructuring and cost-cutting.

Under "organisational change and redundancy," the union states that the "agreement should specify that no individual should be subject to organisational change affecting their employment more than once in the life of the Agreement." This would still allow management to carry out restructures

and cuts.

Despite the strike and picket, management has declared that classes will go ahead. An email to students from Mark Hoffman, a deputy vice-chancellor, said “there may be limited disruption in some areas” but “we expect that most classes will continue as normal.”

Assisted by the readiness of the NTEU to impose job and wage cuts, the management at UoN, like other universities, seized upon the pandemic to accelerate pro-business restructuring, at the expense of staff and students.

As a result, UoN recorded a surplus of \$185,270,000 in 2021, while over 164 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) jobs were destroyed among academic staff and another 61.4 FTE jobs among professional staff and 530 of the university’s 2,200 courses were cut at the end of 2020.

However, this does not give the full picture. According to the UoN 2021 Annual Report released this year, there were only 387 FTE casual staff at the campus last year. That indicates that as many as 500 casual staff lost their jobs between 2020 and 2021.

Nationally, the NTEU has not made any demand for an end to redundancies, let alone for the reinstatement of the thousands of jobs, both permanent and casual, which have been eliminated across the country.

The cuts are still deepening under the Labor government. This week, James Cook University announced that it would cut 130 out of 1,313, or 10 percent, of professional staff positions. That would retrench 78 staff and scrap 52 currently unfilled positions.

In staff emails throughout August, the NTEU hailed a Western Sydney University (WSU) agreement as an “historic win” for university workers and a “model” to be replicated. This is a fraud and a warning of what the NTEU is seeking to impose at UoN and elsewhere.

Firstly, there has not even been a vote at WSU by the membership on this deal, the details of which have not been finalised. Secondly, the agreement proposes a real wage cut—averaging 3.5 percent per year—completely in line with the demands of the Reserve Bank and the Albanese Labor government.

Thirdly, the agreement would merely give the university’s casual academics first preference in applying for around 150 full-time positions, allowing management to decide which casuals it deemed employable. The union also dropped claims for 17 percent employer superannuation contributions and paid sick leave for casuals.

As restructuring and cuts have intensified nationally since 2020, NTEU officials have told members repeatedly that no industrial action can be taken outside of enterprise bargaining periods, because of the anti-strike Fair Work Act. But that was introduced by the 2007–2013 federal Rudd-

Gillard Labor governments with the complete support of the trade union bureaucracy.

NTEU leaders have lamented in meetings that workers are not joining the union and that is supposedly why they do not have the strength to take on management. But the precipitous decline in membership is the result of the union’s role, working arm-in-arm with managements, in blocking a unified struggle and pushing through regressive enterprise agreements, imposing cuts to jobs, wages and conditions.

This disaffection with the union was seen in the recent NTEU national leadership election, in which only 5,552 members voted, or about 20 percent of the membership of 26,563, which has shrunk from 31,000 in June 2020, only two years ago.

Together with the CFPE, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) calls for a unified struggle of university workers and students against the deepening cuts. We warn that no step forward can be taken through the trade unions, which have shown that they are nothing more than apparatuses to straitjacket workers and impose the demands of managements.

We urge students and university workers to establish rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions. This is bound up with fighting for free high-quality education for all, and for the right to secure permanent work for all university staff, as part of a socialist perspective that rejects the dictates of the corporate elite.

That means building the CFPE, the educators’ rank-and-file organisation, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, as part of an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. Contact the CFPE:

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To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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