

Oppose the Australian university union's sellout at Western Sydney University College

Committee for Public Education
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The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators' rank-and-file network initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, urges educators and professional staff at the Western Sydney University College to vote no at this week's official ballot on a wage-cutting and pro-restructuring enterprise agreement struck with management by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU).

This deal was endorsed by only 11 NTEU members at a sparsely-attended union meeting in late September. It is one of the most blatant efforts by the NTEU and all the trade union apparatuses to impose the Albanese Labor government's demands for at least two more years of real wage cuts, as well as further social spending cuts, while delivering tax cuts for the rich and boosting military spending in preparation for involvement in US-led wars.

A vote against this retrograde proposed agreement will be a blow to the NTEU's drive to inflict similar pay-cutting sellouts at Western Sydney University (WSU) itself and throughout the tertiary education sector, as well as to the wider attempts of the union bureaucracies to enforce Labor's pro-business agenda.

Significantly, the ballot of all WSU College employees is being conducted by management and the NTEU this Wednesday and Thursday in the shadow of the Labor government's first budget on Tuesday.

This budget will be the first installment in Labor's plans, dictated by the financial markets, to make the working class pay for the budget debt, global economic crisis and roaring inflation produced by the massive handouts to the money markets and big business during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the US-instigated war against Russia in Ukraine.

As a CFPE supporter pointed out at the farcical and anti-democratic tiny union meeting in late September,

the low attendance revealed the level of disillusionment, with workers rightly seeing the NTEU as an obstacle to the defence of jobs and conditions.

As she explained, the proposed WSU College-NTEU pact is regressive on every front. For a start, after six years of below-inflation wage rises since the last such enterprise agreement was struck in 2016, the proposed increases are less than half the predicted official inflation rate of 7.75 percent by the end of the year—just 2 percent this year, 3 percent in 2023 and 3.25 percent in 2024.

Moreover, the agreement would clear the way for further corporate restructuring of the WSU feeder college at the expense of jobs and conditions. Central to the proposal is Part K on “managing change,” particularly “major changes in the composition, operation, or size of The College's workforce.”

The NTEU agrees to assist the College “to remain competitive in the market and continue to enjoy success,” which means “it may need to change its structure, operations, and priorities to meet business requirements.”

Clause 46.15 permits management to not only retrench workers but also axe jobs by “natural attrition”—that is, non-replacement of staff—as well as supposedly “voluntary” leave without pay, taking of long service leave and conversion to reduced employment.

Likewise, the proposals for personal leave are aggressive. Staff absences of one day on more than five occasions without evidence of illness or injury would require the employee to provide evidence for personal leave for the next year for single day absences. There are many other such clauses, including on terminating employment for ill health.

Claims by the management and the NTEU of giving

casuals opportunities to convert to secure employment are a fraud. According to management’s misleading “summary” of the agreement: “The College will fill at least 18 FTE positions through conversions over the life of the Agreement.”

That would be a drop in the bucket for the WSU College workforce of hundreds of people, many employed as casuals. In reality, however, the casual conversion proposals are so vague as to be meaningless. Clause 15.3 (a) states that casuals have the “right to seek conversion to ongoing or fixed term employment.” That would leave management with the power to select who would be appointed.

Moreover, recent conversions at the College consist of casuals being permanently employed, but for as few as two days a week. Many academics employed on this basis continue to work as casuals at other institutions in order to make ends meet.

Mandated annual leave, which currently applies to teaching staff, would apply to professional staff as well, dictating when they can take leave. When a professional staff member opposed this at September’s meeting, the NTEU delegate said the union considered it a necessary compromise.

Another proposal is for annual leave approvals for the month of January to be “limited and subject to The College’s operational requirements, unless there are exceptional circumstances.” This would particularly disadvantage those with school-aged children, who have school holidays in January.

Similarly, “Remote Working Arrangements” to allow employees to apply to work from home for a maximum of two days per week in the midst of the ongoing pandemic would be “dependent on operational requirements.”

In 2021, WSU College workers voted overwhelmingly, by 78 percent, against a non-union agreement that demanded an obvious real pay cut—a rise of just 1.25 percent per year over three years—and the continued systemic underpayment of casual educators. But this NTEU deal is no better.

Voting no on this NTEU betrayal needs to be followed by the College workers linking up with their fellow WSU workers to defeat the union’s draft WSU agreement as well.

Far from an “historic win,” as the NTEU has endlessly proclaimed, the WSU deal proposes pay rises

averaging just 3.5 percent per year. That is a substantial real wage cut, in line with the demands of the Reserve Bank and the federal Labor government.

Nor is the WSU deal any victory for casuals either. It would merely give casual academics first preference in applying for maybe 150 full-time jobs over three years, allowing management to decide who is selected. The deal also drops casuals’ demands for 17 percent superannuation and paid sick leave.

These NTEU sellouts are part of the union’s long and intensifying pro-management record. When the COVID pandemic emerged in early 2020, the NTEU, without consulting its membership, volunteered wage cuts of up to 15 percent and around 18,000 job cuts.

Despite a widespread membership revolt against this barefaced betrayal, the NTEU continued to impose salary and job cuts at individual universities, including WSU, while opposing a unified struggle to defend jobs, pay and conditions. At WSU, the cuts to 400 jobs and wages led to a record surplus of \$143 million in 2021.

Rejecting the latest NTEU betrayals at WSU would be a crucial first step in developing a unified struggle of workers against the pay cuts, intolerable workloads and corporate-driven restructuring, now being deepened by the Labor government.

To organise this counter-offensive, the CFPE calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions. To take this fight forward, the CFPE and the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC) have called a joint online public meeting on Sunday, November 20 at 3 p.m. (AEDT).

Titled, “Unite educators and health workers: Oppose the ending of COVID protection measures! Lives before profit!” the meeting will outline a political perspective, including the building of rank-and-file committees, to unify health workers, teachers and other sections of workers in the fight for decent wages, working conditions and the elimination of COVID-19. Register now: <https://bit.ly/3CRCuOh>



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