

# Australian university union shuts down strikes at University of Sydney

Jack Turner

15 November 2022

After seven days of strikes this year and 16 months of talks, unsuccessfully trying to reach an enterprise bargaining deal with management, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has suspended strike action at the University of Sydney for four months.

At a NTEU branch meeting on November 2, the branch committee proposed shutting down stoppages until March, during the third week of Semester 1 for 2023, and seeking an “acceptable agreement” with management over the summer break.

This is a warning of another sellout by the NTEU, which has already allowed the destruction of at least 300 jobs at the university since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, as part of the elimination of up to 90,000 jobs nationally.

The committee presented a motion that only gave members the “option” of striking for a minimum of either one day or one week (subsequently amended to three days) in four months’ time.

The first “option” was supported by branch president Nick Riemer who is a supporter of the pseudo-left Solidarity group, and the second was supported by the pseudo-left NTEU Fightback group.

Both pseudo-left factions worked to divert discussion into exchanges over the duration of such a strike, while agreeing that it would only be called “barring an acceptable agreement being reached over summer.”

Whatever their purported tactical differences, they sought to politically disarm NTEU members in the face of major attacks by the university management on working conditions, and promote illusions that the union would fight them.

They made no reference to the underlying ruling class agenda, as demonstrated by the Albanese Labor government’s first budget, which is based on further driving down real wages and cementing deep cuts to

university funding over the past decade.

The preamble to the branch committee motion simply “notes” management’s vicious agenda, which includes increasing casualisation, imposing a pay rise below the soaring inflation rate and making it easier to carry out restructuring.

Further, the management wants to dismantle the traditional academic workload allocation of 20 percent administration and 40 percent each for teaching and research, in favour of narrower teaching-focused roles. It is also demanding the removal of a requirement to advertise internally for most administrative job vacancies.

The union’s own log of claims is vague, designed to permit the NTEU bureaucrats to present a sell-out as a “big win,” as they have done with their retrograde real pay-cutting deal at Western Sydney University, which has yet to be put to a ballot.

On the issue of pay, the union withdrew its initial demand of only 4 percent a year but has not advanced a new claim. At a poorly advertised meeting in July, the branch leadership insisted that workers accept the NTEU national leadership’s maximum wage claim edict, limiting claims to the official Consumer Price Index plus 1.5 percent.

As a member of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) explained at the November 2 meeting, university workers need to establish a united struggle with workers more broadly against the pro-war and pro-business Albanese government. He condemned the NTEU branch leadership for providing a platform for a Labor Party member of parliament at an October 13 strike rally, while preventing non-vetted striking workers from speaking.

By promoting a Labor MP at its rally, the NTEU underlined its intention, like that of all the other unions,

to assist the Labor government to implement its regressive agenda.

Labor's budget, handed down on October 25, increased military spending by 8 percent this financial year, cut public hospital funding by \$2.4 billion over four years, and predicted that over the next two years 150,000 jobs will be destroyed, wages will keep falling, and the cost of living will continue to soar.

On the same day, October 25, the NTEU provided a platform for the university management to defend its offensive. The union held an all-staff forum, at which only Riemer and management representatives were permitted to speak.

The union used the event to plead with Vice Chancellor Mark Scott and Provost Anna-Marie Jargose to help seal a deal by personally attending bargaining meetings with the union.

Riemer appealed for "a meaningful, genuine dialogue" with management that would include "a genuine conversation" about the university's demands.

The only purpose of such "dialogue" and "conversations" is for the union to claim some possible minor concessions to justify pushing through management's regressive agenda.

Riemer reassured Scott and Jargose that the union was prepared to jettison its log of claims, even though the claims had been "democratically developed" and reflected the views of "thousands of members... about what the most serious problems were on campus" that affected workers' "rights."

The union had "met somewhere in the middle" on multiple areas already and would be willing to do so again, Reimer said.

There is growing unrest among staff after decades of attacks on wages and conditions facilitated by the unions, which have accelerated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

That anger was shown by questions from staff members at the management forum. Participants could post questions online and vote up or down questions from others. The most popular questions were about falling real wages, followed by the destruction of the 40/40/20 workload system, and the poor conditions for casual and administrative staff.

"Staff are exhausted after two or more years of the pandemic and the cost of living has skyrocketed," one worker wrote. "The University of Sydney has record

profits and enrolments. Appropriate pay rise now!"

Similar conditions, management attacks and discontent exist throughout the country's public universities, where the union has also helped the employers to force staff back onto campuses amid the ongoing pandemic.

To straitjacket university workers, the NTEU has policed the enterprise bargaining system, imposed by previous Labor governments and the unions, which bans most strikes and keeps workers isolated from each other in individual workplaces.

To discuss how to launch a counter-offensive, university workers are urged to join the CFPE's joint online public meeting with the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee on Sunday November 20 at 3 p.m. (AEDT).

The meeting is titled, "Unite educators and health workers: Oppose the ending of COVID protection measures! Lives before profit!" It will outline a political perspective, including the building of rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucrats, to unify health workers, educators and other sections of workers in the fight for safety, decent wages and conditions, and the elimination of COVID-19. Register now: <https://bit.ly/3CRCuOh>



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