

Australian university union's "historic win" at WSU exposed

Our correspondent
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For three months now, National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members nationally have been bombarded with claims by the union of an "historic win" through a proposed "in principle" enterprise agreement at Western Sydney University (WSU).

The union has promoted the "WSU model" as a template for deals it is trying to strike with other university managements, even though WSU staff members themselves had no access to the actual finalised academic and professional staff agreements until November 10.

Only six days later, in the middle of exam marking, the NTEU convened a sparsely attended WSU members' meeting on November 16 to push through a vote to endorse the lengthy document as quickly as possible, giving educators little time to examine and discuss it.

Just a day later, the university management announced a snap electronic ballot on the agreements on November 28 and 29. Working closely together, the management and the NTEU are in a rush to seal the three-year enterprise agreement (EA) during one of the busiest times of the year for staff finalising student results.

Even the brief discussion at the November 16 meeting, however, further exposed the true nature of the "WSU model."

Long-time law educator Michael Head pointed out that the EA would confine wage rises to an average of just 3.5 percent a year—way below the official inflation rate that is officially predicted to hit 8 percent by the end of the year.

That 3.5 percent figure was exactly in line with the demands of the Albanese Labor government and the financial markets, transmitted through the Reserve Bank.

Moreover, Head said the fine print of the EA showed that the supposed great victory in securing 150 new full-time jobs for casual teachers over three years is a hoax. The new appointees would be overwhelmingly teaching-focussed, for at least three years, as per clause 16.13 of the EA, thus creating a new super-exploited body of teachers with little time for research.

These jobs could be part-time, as per clause 16.4, and subject to a two-year "confirmation" period, during which the appointees could be easily terminated. Even for these jobs, the management would retain the right to pick and choose which, if any, of the casuals was "appointable," as per clause 16.7.

And this was after the elimination of at least 400 jobs at WSU during 2020 and 2021, the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing the management to post a record surplus of \$143 million in 2021, up from \$22 million the previous year.

Head said that job destruction was part of the avalanche of job losses throughout the sector which the NTEU assisted, even after a membership revolt against its supposed "Job Protection Framework" offer in May 2020 to help the employers shed at least 18,000 jobs and impose wage cuts of up to 15 percent.

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

Then there was the NTEU's misinformation about "No more than one change proposal affecting a staff member's job in 3 years." Head explained that even that limited promise was rendered meaningless by clause 46.1, being subject to "exceptional circumstances," including "substantial adverse changes in government funding or major negative economic disruption."

Rather than exceptional, these circumstances were very likely as the pandemic resurged, the global economy lurched into recession and the Albanese Labor government unveiled even greater cost-cutting than in its first budget last month. Just as meaningless was clause 45.3, by which the university would “seek to minimise retrenchments where possible.”

Head recalled that the NTEU branch president David Burchell and vice chancellor Barney Glover had told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that the EA was a “seismic shift” in industrial relations, like the notorious “Job Protection Framework.” Burchell had said the agreement was “a similar grand compromise.”

Head warned that this was a recipe for another assault on wages and working conditions. It fitted the Labor government’s pro-business agenda, which included further restructuring universities, via a so-called Universities Accord, to satisfy the vocational and research demands of the corporate elite and the US-aligned military-intelligence establishment.

In response, a member of the NTEU’s bargaining committee declared that “there will always be restructuring.” Later he posted a chat in which he predicted “40-plus change proposals” during the three years of the EA.

The proposed EA was passed, by 80 to 3, with 2 abstentions, but that is a tiny fraction of WSU’s near 3,000-strong workforce. The small attendance reflected seething discontent with the betrayals of the NTEU.

At WSU’s feeder college there was a significant 35 percent vote in this month’s ballot against the union’s regressive pay-cutting EA deal with management. Less than half the eligible staff members voted—another sign of disaffection with the union.

Head called for the development of a “no” campaign for the electronic ballot of all WSU staff, as a “first step” in a broader fight.

“We need to take matters out of the hands of the union officials by forming a rank-and-file committee, in order to develop our own log of claims and link up with our colleagues at every other university and tertiary education facility for a common struggle,” he said.

Head suggested that those claims would include:

- annual pay rises of at least 8 percent to catch up and match inflation
- the restoration of all jobs eliminated in 2020 and

2021

- the right of all university workers to secure ongoing employment
- protection from the pandemic and
- government funding to provide free first-class education for all students instead of pouring billions of dollars into preparations for more US-led wars.

That would mean taking a stand against the Labor government and the corporate elite, and defying the dictates of the money markets as part of the struggle to reorganise society along genuinely democratic and egalitarian, that is socialist, lines.

To discuss how to develop this counter-offensive, we urge university workers and students to join a joint online public meeting this Sunday, November 20, called by the Committee for Public Education and Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee, rank-and-file networks supported by the Socialist Equality Party.

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, 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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