

Vote no to the Australian university union's sellout at Western Sydney University

Committee for Public Education
22 November 2022

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) urges Western Sydney University staff members to vote “no” at the rushed November 28-29 electronic ballot on the wage-cutting enterprise agreement struck with management by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU).

Less than a week after being released in full for the first time on November 10, the agreement was endorsed by only about 80 NTEU members at a sparsely-attended union meeting, conducted on November 16, in the middle of exam marking.

Now, giving staff members further little time to read and dissect the fine print of the lengthy document—which has 120 pages, 66 clauses and 4 schedules—the management and the NTEU have called a snap ballot.

For months, ever since it announced a sketchy three-page “heads of agreement” with the management in August, the NTEU has bombarded its members at Western Sydney University (WSU) and nationally with emails falsely claiming that the deal is an “historic WIN.”

In a further attempt to mislead university workers, and preempt the vote at WSU, the latest union mass email describes it as a “fantastic win.” Desperate to seal similar deals elsewhere, the union is presenting the agreement as a wonderful template to be emulated at universities across the country.

Nothing could be further from the truth, as an examination of the details of the proposed three-year enterprise agreement (EA) shows.

In fact, it entirely dovetails with the efforts by the NTEU and all the trade unions to impose the Albanese Labor government's demands—outlined in its October 25 budget—for at least two more years of real wage cuts, as well as further education and health cuts, while delivering tax cuts for the rich and boosting military spending in preparation for involvement in US-led wars.

The NTEU praised the budget, even though it cements a \$10 billion cut to university funding over the past decade. According to the budget papers, higher education expenditure is expected to decrease by more than 9 percent

in real terms from 2021–22 to 2024–25.

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

The proposed 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 2022. That 3.5 percent figure is exactly in line with the demands of the Albanese government and the employers, transmitted through the Reserve Bank.

The supposed victory in securing 150 new full-time jobs for casual teachers over three years is a sham. These jobs could be part-time, as per clause 16.4 of the EA, 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.

Moreover, the new appointees would be overwhelmingly teaching-focussed, for at least three years, as per clause 16.13, thus creating a new super-exploited body of teachers with little time for research.

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

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 proposed EA also involves the union dropping claims for 17 percent

employer superannuation contributions and paid sick leave for casual employees.

The NTEU claims that the EA would offer protection against retrenchments via restructuring. According to the union's talking points: "No more than one change proposal affecting a staff member's job in 3 years."

Even that extremely limited promise is rendered meaningless by clause 46.1. It is subject to "exceptional circumstances," including "substantial adverse changes in government funding or major negative economic disruption."

Rather than exceptional, such circumstances are likely as the pandemic surges, the global economy lurches into recession and the Albanese government unveils more cost-cutting. Just as meaningless is clause 45.3, by which the university would "seek to minimise retrenchments where possible."

After announcing the "heads of agreement," NTEU branch president David Burchell and vice chancellor Barney Glover told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation it was a "seismic shift" in industrial relations, like the notorious "Job Protection Framework." Burchell hailed the agreement as "a similar grand compromise."

This is a warning of further assaults on jobs, wages and working conditions. It fits the Labor government's pro-business agenda, which includes 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.

The NTEU has welcomed the Accord review process, to be conducted by a panel that features Macquarie Bank CEO Shemara Wikramanayake, just as it embraced the pro-business "education revolution" of the last Greens-backed Labor government, that of Rudd and Gillard from 2007 to 2013.

As part of this "revolution," Labor's "demand-driven" funding system forced universities to compete for enrolments, primarily by offering vocational courses, while cutting funding by \$3 billion in 2012–13. This drove institutions to rely on under-paid and insecure casual staff—now two-thirds of the workforce—and become increasingly dependent on milking full-fee paying international students.

Over the past two years, the NTEU and the other main campus union, the Community and Public Sector Union, also have assisted universities in forcing staff and students to prematurely return to face-to-face classes, helping create the conditions for COVID-19 to infect two-thirds of the population.

There is seething discontent among university workers

with the role of the unions. That disaffection was shown at WSU's feeder college, where there was a significant 35 percent vote in this month's ballot against the NTEU's even more regressive pay-cutting EA deal with management. Less than half the eligible staff members voted in that ballot.

University workers, together with students, need to review these bitter political experiences.

A "no" vote on the electronic ballot of all WSU staff would be a first step in developing a unified struggle of workers, including health workers and teachers, against the pay cuts, intolerable workloads and corporate-driven restructuring being deepened by the Labor government.

That means taking matters out of the hands of the union officials by forming rank-and-file committees in order to develop demands based on the needs of workers and students, not corporate profit dictates. Such demands 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 requires taking a stand against the Labor government and the ruling class, as part of the struggle to reorganise society along genuinely democratic and egalitarian, that is socialist, lines.

This is the perspective advanced by the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), a rank-and-file network established by the Socialist Equality Party, as part of the worldwide fight to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. To discuss how to develop this campaign, we urge university workers and students to contact the CFPE:

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To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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