

# Australia: University of Newcastle pushes a non-union enterprise agreement

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Up to 600 University of Newcastle (UoN) workers attended a meeting called by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) last week to oppose the university management's decision to put its proposed enterprise agreement to a staff ballot this week without trade union endorsement.

A protracted bargaining dispute has lasted for 15 months since the enterprise agreements covering academic and professional staff expired in September 2021. In a bid to bypass the unions, the management has imposed a three-day electronic ballot, ending tomorrow.

The strong meeting turnout is an indication of the determination and readiness of university workers to fight the deepening assault on their working and social conditions, not just at Newcastle but across the country and internationally.

However, the NTEU is continuing to isolate university workers, institution-by-institution, within the straitjacket of the Labor government's anti-strike enterprise bargaining laws, opening the door for the management offensive.

The UoN management is seeking to slash wages and conditions for workers, offering a 9.5 percent pay "increase" over the life of a three-year agreement. This is far less than inflation, which is projected to surpass 8 percent in the new year.

At the same time, management wants to increase the span of working hours for professional staff from 8am-6pm to 7am-7pm. It is also insisting that the 25 days of annual leave be split into "sick and carers" leave of 15 days and "life leave" of 10 days. Life leave will not accrue year-on-year, potentially limiting the amount of leave staff members can take and it will be at management's discretion.

Management is also demanding the introduction of a new employment category called "Periodic Employment," which will employ teaching-only academics as casuals without the current 25 percent casual pay loading.

The NTEU officials are urging a "no" vote. Simultaneously, however, they are offering ever-greater concessions to management in a bid to seal a deal. Their

chief concern is that the proposed agreement "will reduce the consultation requirements that management must follow to make changes." That is, the union bureaucrats will be sidelined from their role as partners with management in overcoming staff resistance to ongoing restructuring at the expense of jobs and conditions.

Emboldened by the role of the unions nationally in blocking any unified struggle against the avalanche of job cuts and restructuring since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, university managements are on the offensive. Some are taking the same course of by-passing the unions in order to impose new agreements that are even more retrograde than the ones they previously struck with the unions.

Growing frustration and hostility among university workers with the suffocating function of the unions has permitted non-union ballots to succeed at Southern Cross University and Charles Sturt University. At the former, the Community and Public Service Union (CPSU), which covers professional staff, openly backed the management's real pay-cutting agreement, declaring it was "fair," citing the university's supposed "challenging financial situation."

A management-government assault on university educators that began under the banner of the pandemic is being intensified. Even by the NTEU's own estimates, up to 90,000 permanent, contract and casual jobs were lost in the first year of the pandemic alone.

That was only possible because the unions worked with managements to suppress resistance after a NTEU membership revolt led to the abandonment of a national NTEU-management deal, falsely called a "Job Protection Framework," by which the union volunteered pay cuts of up to 15 percent and the elimination of at least 18,000 jobs.

At UoN, approximately 500 casual staff members alone lost their jobs during 2020 and 2021, without the unions calling any industrial action to oppose this. Moreover, at no university across the country has the NTEU called for the reinstatement of the thousands of jobs that have been lost.

The union-enforced "bargaining" framework, first

imposed by the Keating Labor government and the unions in the 1990s, has been the mechanism by which the university employers, working hand-in-hand with the union bureaucrats, have inflicted productivity increases and regressive conditions on workers.

There must be no illusions. Union officials are perfectly willing to trade off workers' conditions and cut wages. In a revealing exchange at last week's NTEU meeting, a member asked: "Noting the gap between what management is serving up and inflation... Is there something in that range that we [the NTEU] might accept?"

NTEU branch president Terence Summers said the union initially called for a "15 percent claim over the lifetime of the agreement." Summers added, however: "I'm not going to accept anything if they are going to cut our conditions and workloads. But we would be prepared to go down from 15 percent if they give us something which is going to cost them money."

Likewise, former NTEU branch secretary Dan Conway commented on social media: "People might accept a pay cut to protect conditions. They might accept a loss of conditions for a pay rise... but they should never accept both."

This presents a false picture that serves the express purpose of sowing disillusionment and pessimism, insisting that there is nothing better that workers can do, and that, regardless of the ballot outcome they will have to accept cuts in one way or another.

The union officialdom is aware of outrage among workers. Summers told the *Newcastle Herald* at the beginning of the month that "the sentiment for industrial action has been very strong for a long time, almost since we started."

Despite this sentiment, there has only been one action, a limited 24-hour stoppage in September. Numbers of classes still went ahead and disruption was minimal. A proposed second day-long strike was never called.

At last week's meeting, NTEU representatives again hailed its "achievements" at other universities, claiming that it won a 13.5-15.3 percent wage claim at Western Sydney University (WSU), 14.55 percent at Australian Catholic University (ACU) and 13.5 percent at University of Tasmania.

In reality, the WSU deal imposed an average annual 3.5 percent wage "rise" over three years—far below inflation. The WSU agreement also permits repeated restructuring in "exceptional circumstances," concedes to management the authority to determine if any casuals are "appointable" to full-time positions and creates a new classification of super-exploited, ex-casual teachers with little time for research.

These provisions are entirely in line with the NTEU's support for the Albanese government's October budget, which cemented \$10 billion worth of funding cuts to

universities over the past decade and insisted on at least two more years of real wage cuts while maintaining huge tax concessions to the rich and increasing military spending.

The ACU deal was a similar sell-out. Just after it was announced, *Campus Morning Mail* reported that ACU is cutting 106 full-time-equivalent positions or 8.2 percent of its workforce.

A "no" vote on the ballot of all UoN staff should 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 transformation of universities being deepened by the Labor government.

Labor's pro-business agenda includes further restructuring universities, via a so-called Universities Accord, to satisfy the vocational and research demands of the financial elite and the US-aligned military-intelligence establishment. The NTEU fully supports this Accord.

To oppose this offensive 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 real pay rises, 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.

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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