

Australian university workers join limited union “week of action”

Our reporters
5 May 2023

Several hundred workers and students from five Melbourne universities joined a stopwork march and rally in the city centre last Wednesday as part of a “week of action” conducted by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) to call for “Better Universities and Better Workplaces.”

University of Melbourne staff members, who participated in a four-hour NTEU stoppage, were joined by colleagues from Monash University, who held a one-day strike, and Deakin and La Trobe universities, where the NTEU also called four-hour stoppages, and Federation University. However, the NTEU did not call stoppages at other Melbourne universities, including nearby RMIT, where most workers knew nothing about the event.

Nor did the other main university union, the closely Labor Party-aligned Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), call any action in support.

Educators who took part in the Melbourne rally, including super-exploited casual academics, did so to fight for pay rises to keep up with the soaring cost of living, for job security and against oppressive workloads, long working hours and blatant underpayment of casuals. Only three in 10 jobs at the country’s 39 public universities are permanent, making it one of the most casualised industries. However, the NTEU bureaucrats and their supporters confined Wednesday’s demands to seeking new enterprise agreements with individual university managements.

Moreover, the event was held two weeks after the NTEU national leadership undemocratically pushed through a split membership meeting vote for a sellout deal at the University of Sydney, assisted by the pseudo-left groups on the union’s branch committee at that university. That betrayal, which features a sub-inflation wage rise and no real guarantees of permanent jobs for casuals, was presented to Wednesday’s rally as a model for settlements at other universities.

The NTEU leaders opposed any move by non-NTEU members to join Wednesday’s stoppages, strictly enforcing the Labor government’s anti-strike Fair Work laws, which prohibit any industrial action outside union-approved “protected” action during enterprise bargaining periods. An NTEU “fact sheet” at the University of Melbourne addressed the question: “Can I join the strike if I’m not a member?” The threatening answer

was: “No, you would be participating in unprotected action if you joined as a non-member. But as soon as you become a member you are protected for industrial action.”

The following day, the NTEU asked its members at James Cook University in Townsville to join a 12-hour strike and called a half-day stoppage at the University of Queensland, continuing a pattern of keeping industrial action as restricted and separated as possible.

There was no mention by the rally speakers of the fact that the Albanese Labor government, now in office for almost a year, is continuing the punishing funding cuts imposed by its Liberal-National predecessor.

Despite its limited character, the event showed the anger and frustration that is continuing to develop among university workers and students after nearly two years of suppressed action since the unions launched their current round of enterprise bargaining. This was the first semblance of any unified industrial action for many years, during which the unions have helped managements carry out sweeping job cuts, casualisation and pro-business restructuring.

This assault has intensified since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the NTEU shocked and angered university workers by volunteering to assist the managements to axe 18,000 jobs nationally and cut wages by 15 percent. That misnamed “Job Protection Framework” collapsed in the face of a rank-and-file rebellion, but the NTEU and CPSU proceeded to ram through cuts to jobs and conditions via deals with individual managements. As a result of the ensuing disgust and dissatisfaction, the NTEU’s membership has plunged from just over 30,000 to 26,500.

For the most part, the NTEU “week of action” was purely token, consisting mainly of BBQs, morning teas, “coffee conversations,” forums, stalls and small rallies at some universities. Furthermore, the theme of “better universities” was thoroughly corporatist, pleading for a partnership with the university employers. It appealed for a united front with individual university managements to help them compete on the higher education “market” established by the previous Rudd-Gillard Labor government. For example, at the Australian National University (ANU) the slogan was “a better ANU.”

At the Central Queensland University (CQU), the NTEU

advertised a “week of action” online forum “where the key players in the success of CQU including management, academics, professional staff, research, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, politicians and Union Reps, sit down to nut out where we are going and what we need at CQU.”

At University of Melbourne itself, the NTEU has kept its proposals to management mostly hidden from its members, let alone the rest of the workforce. No details were provided at Wednesday’s rally. In his current bargaining update on the union’s web site, the NTEU branch president David Gonzalez said the May 3 half-day stoppage had been called to ask the management to “bring a reasonable offer to the bargaining table.”

What the NTEU leadership regards as “reasonable” can be judged by its claim for a “fair pay rise” of 15 percent over three years. Like the deals already struck at other universities, including the University of Sydney and Western Sydney University, that amounts to a further ongoing severe real wage cut. The Consumer Price Index has run at nearly 8 percent over the past year, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics cost-of-living index for workers hit 9.6 percent this month.

At the conclusion of Wednesday’s rally, there were cheers when the union moved a resolution for possible further industrial action “up to and including” an unspecified “open-ended strike” if management failed to improve its offer by next month. But the clear intent of the NTEU leaders is to use that threat simply as a device to cut another retrograde three-year agreement with the management, as it is seeking to finalise at the University of Sydney.

Among the rally participants there was broader opposition to the underlying further transformation of universities into institutions serving the narrow vocational and research demands of the corporate elite and the military preparations for war against China.

Matt, a casual academic, told the WWS: “University management seems intent on running an extractive, real estate type profit-driven enterprise while pushing workers harder, which results in worse outcomes, worse mental health and a worse experience for our students...”

“Many of us have been underpaid by the university who have been employing us under exploitative casual contracts. The first thing we need to do is to show people here that it’s the collective labour of the people in this rally and the students that keeps this place afloat.”

Matt commented: “There might be a perception that academics and knowledge workers are well off but many of us are struggling to make ends meet and are struggling to make choices that affect the work that we do. We hear stories from the United States about academics sleeping in cars then turning up to teach classes or deliver seminars.”

The commonality of the attacks facing all workers was highlighted by John, a young transport driver, who joined the rally. “I’m a casual and I was called this morning to say I have

no shift,” he explained. “I was walking past so I thought I would come down. I support strikes.”

The university trade union apparatuses, like all the rest of the unions, are totally opposed to any fight for united action by the working class against the program of austerity and war being imposed by the Albanese government and other capitalist governments internationally.

The unions agree with the Labor government’s pro-business agenda, including for universities. In its submission to the Labor government’s current Universities Accord review, the NTEU proposed that the “core mission” of universities features “operating as the engine which turbo-powers the professional job market.”

The submission kept silent on Labor’s ongoing funding cuts and called instead for a small \$500 million higher education fund, from the proceeds of which universities could compete for “workforce development including converting insecure jobs to ongoing positions.”

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), an educators’ rank-and-file network, is fighting for the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatuses, to take forward a struggle based on the development of demands to meet the needs of workers and students, not the Labor government, the employers and corporate profit.

These committees would link up to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees initiated by the Socialist Equality Parties to unite workers, including university workers, globally in the struggle against the bankrupt capitalist profit system. To discuss how to form rank-and-file committees, and obtain help to do so, contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/678929646894212

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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