

Union tries to limit action after overwhelming strike vote at Sydney's Macquarie University

Committee for Public Education
15 May 2023

In the first week of May, National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members at Sydney's Macquarie University voted overwhelmingly—by 97 percent—for industrial action to fight for better pay and conditions and job security. This is after months of delay by the union since the last enterprise agreement expired nearly 18 months ago, on December 31, 2021.

The ballot, in which 80 percent of the university's 600 or so NTEU members voted, is another indication of the discontent, and willingness to fight, among university workers over the ongoing assault on their jobs and conditions, which has intensified since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

However, the NTEU is seeking to confine the options to be put to a members' meeting this Wednesday to three minimal actions: 1) Making statements explaining why NTEU members are taking industrial action 2) A ban on working outside usual hours of work 3) Calling a stop-work meeting at the end of May.

But stronger actions were supported on the industrial action ballot: work stoppages of between five minutes and 24 hours, and indefinite stoppages.

Moreover, the NTEU is couching in amorphous language the “outstanding issues” in its negotiations with management for a new three-year enterprise agreement. It is promoting as a model, a supposedly “transformational” agreement struck at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) that imposes a further cut in pay compared to inflation, and provides no guarantee of secure employment for casual academics and professional staff.

Members of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators' network, sent a letter to the union branch office on Sunday night asking what exact demands and proposals the union is discussing with management in their negotiations.

The letter asked why the options being put to the meeting did not include the stronger ones that were on the industrial action ballot, and asked for the voting figures on all the options to be provided to members, so they could make

informed decisions on Wednesday.

In a belated reply today, the union kept totally silent on its proposals to management. On the voting figures, it only said the information was on the web site of the Fair Work Commission, the federal government's industrial tribunal—which is unknown to ordinary members.

The union did not explain why it had not made the figures available to members. But that is because they show strong support (94 percent) for strikes of up to 24 hours and (77 percent) for indefinite stoppages.

In response to the letter's request, the union promised to circulate today a CFPE motion (see below) calling for the formation of a rank-and-file committee to take forward the fight at Macquarie University and for a broader struggle across all universities.

This motion is essential. Left in the hands of the NTEU and the branch committee, the dispute will continue to be isolated to one university, further worn down and limited to negotiating with the management on its terms.

At Macquarie, at least 350 full-time jobs were eliminated in 2020?21, as part of an avalanche of job destruction nationally, in which between 40,000 and 90,000 jobs were axed. That was after 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.

This misnamed “Job Protection Framework” collapsed in the face of a rank-and-file rebellion, but the NTEU and the other main campus trade union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), proceeded to push through cuts to jobs and conditions via deals with individual managements. As a result of the ensuing disgust, the NTEU's membership has plunged from just over 30,000 to 26,500.

After nearly a year of the Albanese Labor government, the discontent is growing. It is now clear that the decades-long funding cuts to universities are deepening. Last week's federal budget cut higher education expenditure further by about 4 percent in real terms, on top of some \$10 billion in cuts dating back to the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments

of 2007 to 2013. The NTEU and CPSU are trying to conceal or play down these ongoing cuts.

A warning must be issued. In response to the rising unrest among university workers and students, also seen in a recent rally and march in Melbourne, the NTEU and the CPSU are trying to finalise and push through retrograde deals with the managements at individual universities as rapidly as possible.

Just last month, 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. That betrayal features a sub-inflation wage rise and no real guarantees of permanent jobs for casuals.

What the NTEU leadership regards as "a fair pay rise" can be judged by the 14.75 percent nominal "increase" over three years at UTS, or less than 5 percent per annum. Like the NTEU deals struck at other universities, this amounts to a further 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.

It is likewise with the union's vague proposals at Macquarie for "enforceable limits to prevent bad change management" and "secure jobs and conversion rights for casual staff." At Western Sydney University, the NTEU's deal allows the management to impose one job-destroying change plan on each employee per three years, and retains management's rights to refuse secure employment to casuals deemed not suitable.

Much broader issues are at stake as well. The unions are participating in, and agree with the underlying thrust of, the Labor government's Universities Accord review, which seeks to further restructure the universities to meet the vocational and research demands of the corporate elite.

The unions are also committed to assisting the government's plans, as outlined in last week's budget, to make the universities central to the war preparations involved in the AUKUS treaty. This military pact with the US and UK governments requires spending hundreds of billions of dollars to acquire long-range nuclear-powered submarines, hypersonic missiles and other hi-tech weaponry for conflict with China. It also requires recruiting and training students to work in the military or war industries.

The CFPE letter foreshadowed the following motion to the May 17 meeting. Adequate time must be given at the meeting to discuss this and any other motions proposed by members:

This meeting calls for the formation of a rank-and-file committee to take forward the fight at Macquarie

University for decent pay, conditions and job security and for a broader struggle based on the development of demands to meet the needs of workers and students, not corporate restructuring.

Such demands should include:

*** Annual pay rises, well in excess of inflation to ensure that workers do not go backward, and to catch up on past losses**

*** Restoration of all jobs eliminated, including from 2020 to 2022**

*** Elimination of intolerable workloads that make genuine research or professional development impossible**

*** The right of all casualised university workers, many of whom have eked out an insecure existence for years, to secure and permanent employment if they want it**

*** Protection from the COVID pandemic, including safe, ventilated facilities and the right to work from home**

*** Free first-class education for all students, instead of the government pouring billions of dollars into preparations for more US-led wars.**

On this basis, the rank-and-file committee would make calls and send delegations appealing to CPSU members and all university staff and students at Macquarie and across the country to join the struggle.

This motion provides the only way forward. To defeat another betrayal, Macquarie workers need to take their struggle into their own hands and turn out to educators and workers in Australia and internationally. That means forming rank-and-file committees of staff and students to develop a mass movement against the program of "sacrifice" and massive war spending, being implemented by the Labor government and other capitalist governments around the world.

These committees would link up to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to unite workers, including education 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: [facebook.com/commforpubliceducation](https://www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation)

Twitter: [@CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)