

Australian university union seeks sellout deal in industrial tribunal after Newcastle strike

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6 June 2023

National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members joined a 24-hour stoppage at the University of Newcastle last Thursday to fight against real pay cuts, insecure jobs and poor conditions.

They were told, however, that the NTEU would seek a deal with management in the Fair Work Commission (FWC) industrial tribunal this week, and “you may not get everything that you want.”

About 100 workers participated in a rally and march in the major industrial city, north of Sydney. The strike had been called after Newcastle management moved to shut down a long-running enterprise bargaining dispute by referring it to the FWC.

The management’s move into the pro-business tribunal came after NTEU members, on May 19, voted down a pay-cutting agreement that had been proposed by management in talks with the NTEU and the other main campus trade union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU).

The May 19 vote and last Thursday’s rally again shows the determination of university staff to fight the offensive being mounted by managements around the country. In recent weeks, there have been stoppages at multiple universities, including Macquarie University and the University of New South Wales, both in Sydney, last week, but the NTEU is keeping each struggle isolated.

Before last Thursday’s Newcastle stoppage, NTEU general secretary Damien Cahill sent emails to members asking them to send messages of protest against management’s decision to invoke section 240 of the Fair Work Act.

That management move placed the dispute in the hands of the FWC. That is as a precondition for activating the “intractable dispute” provisions of new industrial laws introduced by the Albanese Labor government last year as a means of shutting down strikes.

Cahill told the rally that management and other

members of the employers’ body, the Australian Higher Education Industrial Association (AHEIA), were trying to bypass the union.

Far from fighting the triggering of these laws, however, the NTEU is using them to pressure its members into accepting sellout deals with managements.

NTEU state secretary Vince Caughley told the rally that the union would enter days of “fraught” meetings and “intensive bargaining” in the FWC, in which the union would offer compromises to management.

Caughley stated: “From the union point of view, we understand that in enterprise bargaining negotiations, you may not get everything that you want.”

This is a warning of another betrayal by the NTEU. It is seeking to impose a retrograde agreement just like it has at Western Sydney University, and is trying to push through at the University of Sydney, while fraudulently labelling these as “big wins.”

The management offer rejected by NTEU members at Newcastle includes a nominal 13 percent wage increase over three years. That is a further pay cut when official inflation is running at near 7 percent annually. Additionally, the “increase” is only backdated to April, so staff will get no compensation for the 21-month effective pay freeze since the dispute began in September 2021.

By contrast, Vice Chancellor Alex Zelinsky has received an annual pay rise of 7 percent, increasing his already massive salary to over \$930,000 a year.

The proposed agreement also contains management demands to increase the span of working hours for professional staff from 8am-6pm to 7am-7pm and does nothing to address oppressive workloads. It further denies casual workers the 17 percent superannuation payment received by permanent staff.

At Thursday’s rally, striking workers spoke to the WSWs about their appalling conditions. One said she was striking because “the conditions for casual staff are really

bad... The amount of unpaid work that many of these casuals are expected to do is insane. There are a lot of people here who have been casuals for 10, 20 even 30 years.

“There are people who are course coordinators who are in casual work, but there are also casuals who might only get four hours a week of work. I know around ten people who do maybe only three hours a week. A lot of casuals also don’t get work often, so they might only work three months of a year.

“No one knows how many staff are casualised at the university. Management knows but they won’t release the numbers. There was also concern at the removal of provisions which make it easier for workers to get fired. That is very concerning. It’s also made difficult by the fact that there is virtually an official freeze on getting tenured positions.”

The dispute at Newcastle is a test case for the Albanese Labor government’s new industrial laws, which came into force this week. They give the pro-business FWC and federal government extraordinary powers to shut down any industrial action deemed to be “intractable” and that might “harm” the economy.

Once a dispute is shifted into the FWC, no further industrial action can be taken. Workers will have their wages and conditions determined in backroom negotiations between management and union bureaucrats, or directly imposed by the FWC.

At the rally, Caughley falsely depicted the anti-strike laws as the product of the previous Liberal-National Coalition government. In fact, they escalate the anti-strike provisions in the enterprise bargaining laws introduced by the Keating Labor government in the 1990s and entrenched by the Rudd-Gillard Labor government in 2009, all with the backing of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU).

Like every other union apparatus, the NTEU has policed this regime for decades, restricting and isolating strikes and opposing any unified struggle, most recently during the COVID-19 pandemic. 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. At Newcastle, at least 500 casual staff members lost their jobs during 2020 and 2021 without the unions calling any industrial action to oppose this.

The Labor Party-aligned CPSU, which covers professional staff, is openly backing management’s proposed agreements at Newcastle, including the real pay cut. On its web site last week, the CPSU opposed

Thursday’s strike and declared: “This is not the time for industrial action.”

Both unions are collaborating with the Albanese government which has further cut university funding in its two budgets. They are participating in its Universities Accord review, which seeks to restructure the universities to more directly meet the vocational and research demands of the corporate elite and integrate them further into the government’s preparations to join a US-led war against China.

At the rally, a researcher told the WSWS that “big money” was being offered to university departments for military-related projects. Universities were being involved in “a war of aggression being prepared by America against China,” he commented.

“The Labor Party and Liberal Party, they are two sides of the same coin. They are doing the same thing. Sometimes you can get caught up in the enthusiasm that they might change something, but they are still cozying up to the United States and its warmongering, and abandoning questions such as housing.”

To oppose this agenda and prevent further betrayals at Newcastle and elsewhere, university workers need to take matters into their own hands by building rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, and turning to other educators and workers nationally and internationally for support and unified action.

These committees would link up with other sections of workers in Australia and worldwide through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) in order to unite workers, including education workers, globally in this struggle. To discuss forming a rank-and-file committee contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

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