

Reject NTEU sellout at University of Sydney and form rank-and-file committees for a broader struggle

Committee for Public Education
16 June 2023

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators' network, urges all staff at the University of Sydney to vote "no" in the management's sudden ballot, starting on Friday, on a shocking sellout deal that was pushed through a hastily-called National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members meeting last Tuesday.

In the most undemocratic manner, the NTEU national leadership and its partners on the university's NTEU branch committee rushed through a vote at that meeting on a three-year enterprise bargaining agreement that opens the floodgates for the establishment for a two-tiered academic workforce. It also imposes a sub-inflationary pay outcome and permits the continuing casualisation of both academic and professional staff.

The other campus union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), had already backed the sellout, which opens the way for the widespread exploitation of over-worked "education focussed" academics and "PhD fellows" (US-style graduate student teachers) to undercut conditions and job security for all educators.

If this betrayal by the trade unions is not defeated, it will set a precedent for a similar assault at every other university.

It is no wonder that the management immediately hailed the outcome of Tuesday's NTEU meeting and quickly announced a snap all-staff ballot. Just over an hour after the meeting finished, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Annamarie Jagose triumphantly emailed all staff to say she was "delighted" that the meeting had endorsed a "sector-leading" agreement with "excellent conditions." The conditions are only "excellent" for the management! The proposed agreement features:

- Management's insistence that up to 25 percent of academic staff be in "education focussed" roles, with oppressive 70 percent teaching workloads, plus "PhD fellows" on poverty wages with limited workload protection.

- A significant pay cut. An average staff member will be worse off by \$100 a week by mid-next year. The proposed wage "rise" averages 4.275 percent per year, just over half the official inflation rate.

- Despite the NTEU branch president Nick Reimer's claim to

have "won a commitment to decreasing casualisation by 20 percent," the other 80 percent of the 11,000 estimated casuals at the university will remain in super-exploited, insecure positions.

- The scrapping of a three-hour minimum engagement clause, so that management can get casuals to do short split shifts, even spread over several days.

- No guarantees that casual academic staff will be converted to permanent positions, as management will have the final say on any conversions, and casuals will have to compete against each other for them.

- Contrary to the union's claims to have won sick leave for casuals, clause 265 states that "No payment will be made for any period of non-attendance."

- Clause 386 opens the way for a broader drive to push educators, including via "performance management" reviews, into heavy teaching loads. It "encourages" tenured academics to increase their teaching load beyond the traditional workload allocation of 40 percent teaching, 40 percent research, and 20 percent administration.

Much more is contained in the fine print of all the clauses.

Similar disputes are underway at universities across Sydney and throughout the country. As it has done for years, however, the NTEU is trying to isolate the struggles at each university.

We call for the formation of genuine rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, at the University of Sydney (USyd) and across the tertiary education sector to reject this historic betrayal and for a broader struggle across all universities, and throughout the working class, against worsening real wage cuts, casualisation and intolerable conditions.

We urge USyd workers to join their colleagues across town at Macquarie University who formed an independent rank-and-file committee on June 9, to take forward this crucial fight, against moves by the NTEU to split and divide members and push through retrograde pay-cutting agreements at one university after another.

There must be a breakout from the isolation imposed by the NTEU on USyd workers, confining them to days of strike

action at one university for nearly two years. The warnings issued for months by the CFPE—despite its members being blocked from speaking—of a sellout being prepared at USyd have been confirmed.

We call for a “no” vote, and a united fight, as part of a wider counter-offensive by workers. That includes the federal public service workers, covered by the CPSU, who have overwhelmingly rejected a three-year deal from the federal Labor government that would slash real wages, and the public health workers taking action against the New South Wales Labor government’s below-inflation pay “rise” for public sector workers.

The anti-democratic events at last Tuesday’s NTEU meeting, and the far-reaching content of its USyd agreement itself, underscore the necessity to break out of the union straitjackets and form new working-class organisations. Spearheaded by branch president Reimer and NTEU general secretary Damien Cahill, the NTEU pushed through a rushed vote without sufficient time for members to read and review, let alone discuss and debate, new retrograde clauses.

At the start of the meeting, Reimer opposed allowing a procedural motion by CFPE member Zac Hambides to postpone the vote for seven days to give members time to properly consider the agreement, which was not even complete at that time, instead consisting of a confusing array of additions or deletions from previous drafts.

After Hambides insisted on reading out the motion, Reimer hurriedly bulldozed through a vote without allowing any discussion on it whatsoever. Nevertheless, despite the resulting confusion, 14 percent of the 900 or so members present—well over 100—voted for the procedural motion, indicating widespread concern and opposition to the sellout.

Cahill was given pride of place, allowed to address the meeting to falsely declare that the proposed agreement was an “excellent” one, and reveal that the NTEU national executive had already endorsed it four days earlier! Cahill also made clear that the NTEU leadership, echoing the management, regarded the deal as “sector-leading,” whose provisions should be replicated nationally.

Reimer and speakers from his misnamed “Rank and File Action” faction on the branch committee, and the other pseudo-left “NTEU Fightback” faction, formally opposed the proposed agreement but provided no way forward at all.

In fact, they joined Cahill and the “Thrive” faction in threatening members that the management would respond to a “no” vote by calling a non-union ballot and/or invoking the Albanese government’s new “intractable” dispute laws, which allow the Fair Work Commission to shut down strikes and impose arbitrated outcomes in the interests of employers. Far from opposing Labor’s anti-strike laws, they all used them as a battering ram to try to intimidate members.

Moreover, Reimer and other pseudo-left speakers essentially blamed members for the failure of their almost two-year

campaign of isolated one- or two-day stoppages to defeat the management’s offensive. Reimer admitted that endorsing the agreement would “entrench punitive overwork for up to 650 new young education focussed colleagues,” but declared: “There is no point whatsoever in voting “no” to the agreement if doing so isn’t accompanied by a firm commitment to further campaigning at a significantly higher cadence than before, starting now.”

That meant committing to the same dead-end course of isolated stoppages that both pseudo-left groups had pursued for nearly two years, while keeping educators trapped within the NTEU’s grip. That course was designed to wear down the members and eventually lead them to the conclusion that nothing more could be achieved. Nonetheless, about 20 percent of Tuesday’s meeting voted against the union’s deal, or abstained, showing a continued opposition to the sellout.

Throughout the dispute, both pseudo-left factions have helped the NTEU leadership block the CFPE’s calls for the only viable alternative—for rank-and-file workers to take matters into their own hands and launch a broader struggle against real wage cuts, staff shortages, casualisation and unbearable workloads, as outlined in the latest June 9 CFPE statement.

Likewise, Reimer cut off debate on the main resolution just before Hambides was due to speak against it and in support of the CFPE resolution, which was to vote “no” and form a rank-and-file committee and unite with the Macquarie University rank-and-file committee to take forward the fight based on the development of demands to meet the needs of workers and students, not corporate restructuring.

The union sellout bid at USyd demonstrates the necessity for rank-and-file committees, in order to develop a mass movement against the program of education budget cuts, tax handouts to the rich and massive war preparations being implemented by the Labor government. These committees would link up to others worldwide through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees in order to unite workers, including education workers, globally in 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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