

Union holds token one-day strike at Australia's University of Melbourne

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About 250 University of Melbourne workers attended a strike rally during a one-day stoppage on June 21, fighting for pay rises to keep up with the skyrocketing cost of living, for secure work, and against unbearable workloads and blatant underpayment of casuals.

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) called the strike after management did not agree to the union's log of claims by June 15. But the stoppage was held during the university's off-peak period after exams had finished for semester one, thus making it largely ineffective.

The real intent of the NTEU's strike was to defuse workers' discontent, channelling it back behind backroom union-management talks.

NTEU officials have been in protracted negotiations with university management for over a year and half to work out another sellout enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA). The previous EBA at the university expired in November 2021.

A major component of the NTEU's call for a 24-hour stoppage was to isolate staff from other university workers around the country who are also engaged in struggle. There was no repeat of six weeks earlier, when University of Melbourne workers joined a 500-strong strike rally with workers from four other Melbourne universities on May 3.

NTEU speakers at last week's event depicted six "claims" to university management as improvements to staff conditions, but they were each consciously presented in vague and unclear terms.

In its claim for "fair pay," the union is calling for a 15 percent increase over three years, or five percent per year. This is only marginally higher than the 4 percent management is offering and well below the soaring cost of living.

The NTEU's headline claim is a "target" of 80

percent secure work by 2024. According to the NTEU's statistics, more than 50 percent of the university's workforce are on insecure casual contracts.

The NTEU claim is for 40 percent of academic workloads to be allocated to research, as a "default" position. This gives management leeway to coerce staff into more onerous workloads. Currently, academic staff workloads are divided into 40 percent teaching, 40 percent research, and 20 percent administration.

The union is also calling for casual and fixed-term contracts to be restricted to "ad-hoc" or "project-based" work. That too gives the management ample room to reclassify casual work as such.

An academic project officer on a fixed-term contract, working three days a week, told the WSWS: "I was a casual worker for quite a long time, as were a lot of my friends. One of them recently got fired without warning and was never given a reason why he was fired. He'd been working for two years. It was a really rough blow for him financially. It shows just how precarious casualised work is."

She said university workers are underpaid. "We should be getting paid more, and especially with this cost-of-living crisis. Wages should be in line with inflation at the very least, and they're not. That's a huge problem."

Members of "Students Support Staff Strikes"—a front organisation of the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative—were on the rally platform. They sought to funnel the genuine concerns among students for their tutors, lecturers and other university workers back into the hands of the union apparatus.

Socialist Alternative members' speeches did not present any alternative demands or calls for a broader struggle across the universities and the working class. Instead, they gave full support to the NTEU's claims

and its continued backroom negotiations with management.

One of them, Ruby, declared that a “victory” had been won recently by University of California workers. In fact, that strike was abruptly ended after six weeks by the United Auto Workers union, which covers some university workers in the US. The UAW’s sellout contract met none of the workers’ basic demands.

None of the speakers opposed the deepening pro-business transformation of universities by the Albanese Labor government. The NTEU supports the corporate restructuring. Its submission to the government’s Universities Accord review says the “core mission” of universities includes “operating as the engine which turbo-powers the professional job market.”

The University of Melbourne stoppage was part of a wave of industrial action by university workers around the country. But none of these struggles were mentioned by the NTEU speakers or the Socialist Alternative members.

That is because these experiences highlight the role that the NTEU and the other main campus union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), are playing at every campus: that of isolating disputes and imposing sellouts.

At the University of Sydney, the NTEU and CPSU have just pushed through a shocking sellout deal. The agreement allows the establishment of a two-tiered workforce, with hundreds of “teaching-focussed” roles, permits further casualisation, including of low-paid PhD student-instructors, and imposes a real sub-inflationary wage cut over three years.

At Macquarie University, the NTEU pushed through a motion at a members’ meeting last month that limited industrial action to a two-hour stoppage despite workers previously voting overwhelmingly for indefinite strikes. At the ensuing stop work meeting, NTEU representatives blocked two members of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators’ network, from presenting a resolution calling for a broader struggle against real pay cuts, casualisation and corporate restructuring.

Macquarie workers, with the assistance of the CFPE, have now established their own rank-and-file committee, independent of the union apparatuses, to have open, democratic discussion in which members can formulate demands and take forward a genuine

fight across the tertiary education industry.

We urge University of Melbourne workers to take the same path. Years of bitter experiences have shown that no such struggle in the interests of university workers and students can be waged through the straitjacket of the unions, which have overseen the degradation of conditions for decades.

Only through the development of rank-and-file committees can workers at the universities, and more broadly, develop the mass movement required to fight against the cuts to education, tax handouts to the rich and multi-billion dollar war preparations being implemented by the Labor government.

Such committees would link up worldwide via the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to unite workers globally in struggle.

To discuss forming a rank-and-file committee, contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators’ network:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: @CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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