

NTEU tries to prepare a sellout at Australia's Macquarie University

Our correspondent
13 July 2023

Events at a meeting of about 120 National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members at Sydney's Macquarie University on Tuesday confirm a warning issued by the newly-established Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee that the union officials seem desperate to finalise a sellout enterprise agreement with the management as fast as possible.

In its emails to members calling the meeting, the NTEU had said: "Campaign at a crossroads." That meant that critical decisions had to be made. But the union was unable to report any new developments whatsoever from its talks with management, so it proposed another members' meeting in three weeks' time.

The motion put to the meeting suspended all, even limited, industrial action for at least those three weeks, while claiming that the union could negotiate a good deal with the management by then.

Throughout the meeting, however, union officials and NTEU branch representatives repeatedly declared that members must not demand too much from management, and definitely not pay rises to match the soaring cost-of-living.

They insisted that if the members rejected a settlement that was acceptable to management it would invoke the new "intractable" dispute provisions of the Albanese Labor government's workplace relations legislation. That would allow the pro-employer Fair Work Commission tribunal to impose an arbitrated outcome.

Far from opposing these laws to shut down industrial action, effectively nullifying the right to strike, the union representatives sought to use the legislation as a weapon to threaten and intimidate staff members.

Opening the meeting, NTEU branch president Nicholas Harrigan claimed that "negotiations have got very close to what we think is doable or is a good deal for members." But no new information was provided as to what such an agreement would include.

Despite saying a deal was "very close," Harrigan contradicted that message himself: "But it's also a situation where there are still the issues at the table and we need to

keep pressure on them to be able to make sure we get a deal that we all deserve."

Harrigan revealed the union's agenda, that of reaching a mutually acceptable deal with management. "We are gonna try to thread the needle, that is keeping pressure on them while not having them try to remove things from members' arms." He raised the spectre of management conducting a non-union ballot, or applying for an "intractable" bargaining order, if the union failed to "thread the needle."

NTEU senior industrial officer Josh Gava reinforced the union's message. Supporting the call to suspend industrial action—after just one two-hour stopwork and a two-hour protest "work-in"—he said "there really is no reason I don't think, for us to take any risks. There is a good negotiated settlement to be had."

Gava claimed that the NTEU had achieved wins on new enterprise agreements at 15 other universities across the country. The truth is that all the deals struck at other universities, including the University of Sydney, facilitate further pro-business restructuring. They allow continued casualisation, and open the way for new teaching-focused roles and greater exploitation of low-paid post-graduate instructors. They also inflict sub-inflationary pay "rises"—that is deeper real wage cuts.

The union's resolution asked the meeting to "note significant progress" that had been made in the enterprise bargaining negotiations. Yet no details were offered of this "progress" beyond the vague claims already made in the union's previous emails.

For example, members of the union's bargaining team spoke of "three huge improvements" on change management—that is restructuring proposals. One win was "limits on exposure to change management." Another was "improvement on redundancy and redeployment." The third was "management will have to conduct an assessment of the work that is to be remained following change management."

None of these "improvements" were specified. As the rank-and-file committee explained in its statement before the meeting, they really mean assisting restructuring: "As in the

past, the NTEU would help management by pressuring staff members into taking so-called voluntary redundancies or accepting unfavourable redeployments.

“At least 350 full-time jobs were destroyed that way at Macquarie in 2020?21, when the COVID-19 pandemic first hit. This was part of a wave of tens of thousands of layoffs nationally, expedited by the NTEU, that shocked and angered university workers.”

The NTEU representatives openly ruled out seeking inflation-matching wage increases and emphasised that no unions had achieved that. One bargaining team member declared: “As we would like to say that we should be immune from global economic forces and government policy and all of the rest of it, we are not... the reality is that the economic historians would tell you that there are some periods where, life is better than others from a monetary point of view.”

In fact, the reality is that all the union apparatuses are enforcing the demands of the Albanese government to keep pay levels well below price rises, thus inflicting the burden of the global economic and inflationary crisis of capitalism onto the backs of workers.

Numbers of members asked questions or raised concerns about the lack of detail on claimed achievements or about halting the industrial action. An amendment moved by a pseudo-left group supporter sought to channel the discontent by proposing a one-day stoppage in two weeks’ time, at the start of the next semester.

“If you want to push them harder, let’s continue our industrial action campaign,” he declared. This perspective, however, is essentially the same as that of the NTEU leaders—seeking a settlement with management via limited industrial action, confined to a single university.

That amendment got 36 votes—about a third of those who voted. That expressed in a distorted way the desire of educators to fight the increasingly intolerable workloads and other conditions they face. In a May ballot, NTEU members at Macquarie voted overwhelmingly for industrial action, with more than 70 percent in favour of indefinite stoppages.

In the end, the union’s official motion was passed, with 103 votes in favour, 3 against and 8 abstentions. But it is clear that the NTEU intends to strike a sellout deal with management as rapidly as possible, while keeping Macquarie workers separated from their colleagues who confront the same kinds of attacks at every other university.

While the union is straitjacketing workers, the Labor government is continuing to starve universities of funds, while demanding, via its Universities Accord review, that they fully subordinate their teaching and research to the requirements of the corporate elite and the military.

The only way forward lies in building rank-and-file

committees, independent of both the NTEU and the other main campus union, the Community and Public Sector Union, so that university staff and students can take control of their own struggles.

The Macquarie rank-and-file committee’s founding statement proposed demands based on what university workers and students need, not the dictates of the financial markets and their governments. These initial demands include:

- the reinstatement of all jobs eliminated by decades of funding cuts, including the thousands of jobs eliminated during the COVID-19 pandemic
- secure employment for all casualised university workers who want it
- pay increases surpassing inflation to compensate for past losses
- thousands of staff must be employed to guarantee that all university workers, both professional and academic, have reasonable workloads
- the right to conduct research that is not influenced by the profit demands of corporate interests, government interference or the demands of the military apparatus
- academic freedom to research, speak and write without management, government or corporate censorship
- free first-class education for all students instead of channelling billions of dollars into preparations for US-led wars.

We urge all staff members who agree with our demands to join the rank-and-file committee. We must initiate a broader fight to link up with workers facing similar struggles across the tertiary education industry and the working class more widely, in Australia and internationally, through the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

To join the committee, or discuss forming a rank-and-file committee at other universities and schools, contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators’ network:

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)