

Union pushes through “in principle” sellout deal at Australia’s Macquarie University

Our correspondent
7 August 2023

Falsely claiming another “good deal,” the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) pushed through a vote on a retrograde “in principle” enterprise agreement at Sydney’s Macquarie University last Thursday.

NTEU representatives blocked discussion as much as possible, knowing there was opposition, and shut the members’ meeting down within an hour, preventing at least two people from speaking against the sellout.

The union reps opposed a procedural motion by a member of the Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee, Chris Gordon, to delay any vote until the union released the agreement’s full details and allowed at least seven days for members to examine and discuss the document.

The union created considerable confusion over the procedure for voting on the rank-and-file motion. Nevertheless, about 20 members voted for it, and another 20 abstained, and only 46 voted against it, out of approximately 190 people in attendance. The meeting’s online chat contained several comments saying that the full agreement needed to be seen before any vote was taken.

Macquarie NTEU branch officials, including president Nick Harrigan, insisted repeatedly that the agreement was a “good deal.” This was clearly false. On workloads and restructuring, the agreement gives a free hand to management. The pay offer, averaging about 3 percent per annum over the life of the agreement until 2026, is a pay cut in the face of soaring official inflation, running at approximately 7 percent.

Speaking against the vote for the “in-principle agreement,” Gordon said: “Even in the summary form that has been provided, the proposed agreement should be voted against. And the fine print may make it even worse.

“It has been said there is no cut in conditions. Really? We have seen three years of attacks, using the pandemic as a pretext.”

Gordon said the management’s offer of 70 new permanent positions did not begin to address casualisation at the university. “Moreover, not a single current casual may actually get a job: it’s all up to management.

“From the summary document, workload protections are non-existent. Committees will be staffed by choices from management... The ‘flexibility’ in workload is for management to ‘deploy resources effectively and efficiently.’ That is, flexibility for management, not staff.

“The so-called restrictions on change proposals are even weaker than the previously proposed one change per agreement. One change proposal per two years is contemptuous of staff. Even that is subject to change on ‘exceptional circumstances.’”

That is, staff members could be subjected to more than one “change proposal”—a restructuring operation—per two years in supposed “exceptional circumstances.” This would likely mean forced redeployment or redundancy.

Gordon pointed to the agenda behind the deal. “There is an increased drive for corporatisation and marketisation at universities. This agreement facilitates that. While the NTEU is pushing sellout deals at one university after another, the Labor government is continuing to starve universities of funds and demanding, via its Universities Accord review, that they fully subordinate their teaching and research to the requirements of the corporate elite and the US-linked military preparations for war.”

Gordon said members had previously shown their readiness to fight for decent conditions by voting in a

ballot by 77 percent for an indefinite strike. “The Macquarie rank-and-file committee gives organised expression to the anger and frustration of staff over workload issues, inability to teach and research. I urge all staff members who agree with our demands for proposals that represent the interests of staff to join the rank-and-file committee.”

The NTEU representatives repeatedly said there was “no diminution of conditions” from the previous agreement of 2018. However, staff pay and conditions have qualitatively worsened since that agreement, with several hundred jobs being eliminated during the pandemic with the assistance of the NTEU.

Only a limited number of people were willing to speak in favour of the agreement. An ex-branch president, Nikki Balnave, was asked to speak. Incredibly, she said: “Vote for the agreement as a whole. Don’t vote no because you disagree with specific conditions.” That is, ignore the negative features of the agreement!

Some members were prevented from speaking against, including rank-and-file committee member Carolyn Kennett, who had her hand up online from the outset.

Unable to put her position to the meeting, a PhD student was left in tears. She was heard to say that PhD students were living 30 percent below the poverty line and the proposed agreement would do nothing for their conditions.

NTEU representatives again tried to intimidate members by saying that if they rejected a settlement, management could 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.

That underscored the union’s role, like all the unions, in policing the anti-strike laws that the Labor government has just reinforced.

In the current round of enterprise bargaining, the NTEU has pushed through at least 15 agreements at individual universities, including Western Sydney and Sydney, that impose sub-inflationary pay deals, facilitate further pro-business restructuring and allow mass casualisation to continue. These agreements also open the floodgates for new teaching-focused roles and greater exploitation of low-paid post-graduate

instructors.

The final vote for the “in principle agreement,” rushed through in the meeting’s dying minutes, was 141 for, 25 against, with the abstentions not reported, except for at least 6 online. That vote largely expressed the widespread lack of confidence that the NTEU officials would take up any fight for better conditions.

Aware of the discontent, the NTEU indicated that the full agreement would be available in “approximately” two weeks, and members would have a week to review the agreement before voting on it.

The Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee will continue to demand that members have at least a week to examine and discuss the fine print, and advance counter-proposals, including to reach out to fellow university workers in Victoria and elsewhere for united action.

As the basis for such a unified struggle, the committee advocates the demands contained in its founding statement. These include the reinstatement of all jobs eliminated by decades of funding cuts and during the COVID-19 pandemic; secure employment for all casualised university workers who want it; and the right to conduct teaching and research that is not dominated by the profit demands of corporate interests, government interference or the demands of the military apparatus.

To join the Macquarie rank-and-file 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

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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