

Australia: University of Melbourne workers launch week-long stoppages

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Workers at the University of Melbourne began a half-day stoppage at noon today, with staff in five faculties or departments striking for the entire week, fighting for better wages, conditions and against rampant casualisation.

National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members will stop work across the university from midday until 7.30pm. Faculty of Arts workers as well as academic and administrative staff from the university's Victorian College of the Arts and FFAM Stagecraft Team and the 757 Swanston Street campus will strike for seven days. Melbourne Law School and student services and library staff will strike for five days.

This is another significant indication of the willingness of university workers to fight back against the protracted offensive on their jobs and conditions, and pro-corporate restructuring, which is only intensifying under the Albanese Labor government.

These are the longest stoppages at the University of Melbourne in decades. They come amid ongoing industrial action by university workers across the country as they face a cost-of-living crisis that has affected workers worldwide.

But the NTEU bureaucracy is trying to contain and isolate the strikes within the straitjacket of seeking a new management-union enterprise agreement at the university. There is no publicity about the stoppages, let alone calls for joint action, on the NTEU's national web site or Facebook page.

That is despite the fact that workers at six universities in the state of Victoria, including Monash and La Trobe, have taken industrial action in ongoing struggles over the same issues of casualisation, job security, workloads and real pay cuts.

Across the country, workers at other universities are locked in similar battles which the NTEU and the other main campus union, the Community and Public Sector

Union (CPSU), are keeping separated from each other.

Everywhere, the union bureaucrats are trying to push through retrograde enterprise agreements with individual managements as they have so far done at 16 universities, including the University of Sydney, and are currently seeking to do at Sydney's Macquarie University.

In each case, these agreements impose sub-inflationary pay deals, facilitate further pro-corporate restructuring and allow mass casualisation to continue. They also open the way for new teaching-focused roles and greater exploitation of low-paid post-graduate instructors.

This assists the agenda of the Albanese government. It is still starving universities of adequate funds, just as the previous Liberal-National government did. And, via its Universities Accord review, it is demanding that universities further subordinate their teaching and research to the vocational and profit requirements of the corporate elite and the AUKUS military preparations for war.

At the University of Melbourne, the NTEU leadership confronts widespread discontent, especially over the super-exploitation of casuals. It has put on a militant face as it continues its backroom talks with management.

The union's headline demand is for 80 percent of staff employed by the university "on a headcount and FTE [fulltime-equivalent] basis" to be engaged in secure employment. Currently, more than half the university's staff are in casual or insecure employment.

The union is also calling for new academic employments to have a workload allocation of 40 percent research, 40 percent teaching and 20 percent administration. This would still allow the university to exploit current academic staff who are overloaded with teaching and administrative tasks, leaving little time for research.

The NTEU only calls for the university to "do what is reasonably practicable" to ensure staff do not have to

work extra hours. That demand is essentially meaningless.

The NTEU's pay claims are most clearly a concession to the big business interests of university management, and the demands of the Reserve Bank of Australia and Labor government to keep wage rises well below the official inflation rate.

Under conditions of the worst cost-of-living and housing affordability crisis in a generation, workers in Australia experienced inflation of up to 8 percent in 2022 and 2023. It is still above 6 percent. The NTEU is calling for a "minimum" of a 15 percent rise over three years. That would be about half the inflation rate.

This would possibly be followed by increases in 2024 and 2025 of 5 percent a year or the Consumer Price Index + 1.5 percent—whichever is higher.

This week's stoppages follow a one-day strike in June, mainly aimed at giving workers a chance to blow off steam so the union leadership could resume its negotiations with management. That event, held during the university's off-peak period, followed a strike rally on May 3 where about 500 staff from four universities held a four-hour stoppage. There has been no combined action since.

For decades, the NTEU and CPSU have allowed the decimation of working conditions, wages and jobs across Australian universities. They have worked closely with the Labor Party which, under the previous Greens-backed governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, imposed a pro-business "education revolution" and then inflicted the largest-ever single cut to higher education funding.

During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the unions have permitted governments and university managements to oversee an acceleration of these processes, including the slashing of tens of thousands of jobs in 2020 and 2021.

Now, as workers internationally are coming into struggle, the union bureaucracies are attempting to prevent growing militancy from breaking out of their grip. They are trying to prevent workers from uniting in a common struggle, even within the same city.

More than 200 NTEU members at RMIT University, only a few kilometres from the University of Melbourne, attended a union meeting last week.

An RMIT academic told the *World Socialist Web Site* that staff "would have gone on strike immediately," but the union told them this was "not possible" due to the anti-strike Fair Work legislation. These laws were imposed in 2007 by the Rudd-Gillard government with the assistance of the union bosses.

Instead, NTEU representatives proposed a series of bans, including bans on releasing results for offshore students and a ban on meetings with managers on issues relating to overseas students during the non-teaching period.

One worker asked in the meeting chat: "What is the rationale for implementing bans during mid-sem break, when we are advised by university not to hold meetings?" After initially ignoring the question until the worker asked twice more for it to be answered, the NTEU leadership only said more action would be decided at a meeting on August 31.

NTEU RMIT branch committee member Liam Ward, a member of the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative, chaired the discussion on behalf of the NTEU. He said there was confusion and hostility within the meeting over the union's proposals. The meeting was closed without addressing many of the issues raised by workers.

Despite the strike at the University of Melbourne, no struggles of university workers outside RMIT were mentioned by the NTEU in the meeting.

At Macquarie University, a rank-and-file committee is calling for the rejection of sellout agreements struck by the NTEU and CPSU that cut real pay and offer no protection from casualisation, excessive workloads, restructuring and further job losses.

The Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee issued a statement on Saturday exposing the details of the unions' proposed agreements and calling for "a unified struggle across the sector, reaching out to other workers, including our Melbourne colleagues, teachers and healthcare workers, for support and joint action." It said: "For that we need rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the union apparatuses."

Contact the Committee For Public Education to discuss setting up a rank-and-file committee at your university or workplace today!

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