

Australia: Discontent grows among University of Newcastle educators as they strike

Our correspondent
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Academic staff at the University of Newcastle (UoN), two hours north of Sydney, are set to strike on March 18 for 24 hours, demanding an end to real pay cuts and intolerable workloads.

An overwhelming vote last month to strike, for the third time in months, is further sign of widespread opposition in universities across Australia to the sweeping pro-business and pro-military restructuring that is being driven by the Albanese Labor government.

This restructuring has eliminated around 4,000 jobs nationally over the past 18 months, slashed courses for students—mainly in humanities—and intensified workloads for both academic and professional staff.

At the largely working-class UoN, like at all Australia's 39 public universities, hundreds of jobs have been destroyed, with staff compelled to compete for a smaller number of new jobs supposedly created.

Yet the campus trade unions have opposed any unified struggle by university workers against Labor's agenda.

Instead, the unions are trying to channel the anger and frustration of university workers back into seeking enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs) with individual university managements, thus isolating struggles such as the one at UoN. Moreover, these agreements will only facilitate further restructuring, just like the previous EBAs have done.

At UoN, while National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members voted by a large majority to strike on March 18, the union officials are seeking yet another retrograde EBA deal with the management, having last year suppressed opposition to the "Business Improvement Plan" restructuring that cut approximately 200 jobs.

This will be the third stoppage in recent months, including a 24-hour strike last November 19, over stalled bargaining, job cuts and course reductions.

As for the union that primarily covers professional staff, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), it has

refused to call any stoppages whatsoever, telling its members in a February 23 bulletin, "we're working toward an agreement."

UoN workers overwhelmingly rejected management's offer in January of a 10 percent pay rise over three years, a real wage cut because the annual inflation rate is now predicted by the Labor government and the Reserve Bank of Australia to near 5 percent by mid-year, fuelled by the criminal US-Israeli war on Iran.

The NTEU is claiming 3.8 percent each year until 2029, which the union described as being equivalent to the consumer price index (CPI) and a bit of catch up on wages lost previously. As the inflation figures show, that is a lie.

On workloads, in February, the management made a claim for a "sliding scale" of up to 80 percent teaching for academic staff, a sharp escalation from the current supposed workloads of 40 percent teaching, 40 percent research and 20 percent administration. There is deep hostility to the fact that most educators already do at least 50 percent teaching.

Management later walked back on the 80 percent claim, which the NTEU said was because of pressure from a planned strike on February 25. The NTEU subsequently cancelled the planned strike as a sign of "good faith" to the university and Deputy President Tony Saunders of the pro-business Fair Work Commission (FWC), which the university called in last October to mediate.

Rather than denouncing management's ploy, the NTEU promoted the illusion that "good faith" would help to keep Saunders supposedly on board, and that the government-appointed FWC would help to reach a "fair deal."

In subsequent negotiations, the NTEU accepted management's modified offer on academic workloads, involving an itemisation of tasks. The NTEU labelled this as progress, saying it gives a basis for workloads to be

contested, but there was clear discontent at an NTEU members' meeting when this was announced.

One staff member revealed that she was advised by NTEU officials to approach workload negotiations individually, despite the fact that most staff are similarly overworked and should be struggling collectively. Another member commented: "I was too overwhelmed by my actual teaching to fix my actual teaching. There was no help from anyone."

At the end of last year, the NTEU helped management push through its "Business Improvement Plan." At an October stopwork rally, NTEU branch president Terry Summers made clear that the union accepted the restructuring.

"We're not saying that the university can't change the way that it operates," Summers told the rally. "No one is trying to do that. All we are trying to say is, be reasonable. If you are going to get rid of people, try to be fair."

In other words, the union's role, as elsewhere around the country, was to partner with management in negotiating job cuts and restructuring, including by driving people out via "voluntary redundancies," in order to suffocate resistance.

As a result of the NTEU's agreement to the restructuring, conditions at the university have become unbearable. The *Newcastle Herald* last week reported a letter from 20 professors and associate professors in the School of Humanities, Creative Industries and Social Sciences that stated: "We have not witnessed the level of anger, depression, frustration and negativity among academics that we do at this present time."

The restructurings across the tertiary education sector are a result of the Labor government intensifying the underfunding by successive governments, both Labor and Liberal-National, over decades, while pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into AUKUS submarines and other war preparations.

Labor's reactionary international student enrolment caps—blaming these students for the cost-of-living and housing affordability crisis—have hit the income of universities, which have relied on charging international students exorbitant fees in order to remain afloat despite government funding cuts.

The Labor government has also continued the previous Liberal-National government's "Job-ready Graduates" scheme that hiked the cost of three-year humanities degrees to more than \$50,000, while reducing the funding to universities for delivering them.

This is all in line with the Albanese government's Universities Accord report, which insisted that universities must focus both their teaching and research on meeting the needs of business and the AUKUS military plan for a US-led war against China.

This is a blueprint for the further commercialisation and militarisation of universities and the slashing of broad education in favour of micro-credentials that give students just enough "skills" to work for employers. The Accord ties university funding to "mission-based compacts," that is how well universities fulfill "national priorities" such as more STEM graduates and closer ties with the military.

UoN itself now boasts of integration with industry, with career-ready placements (unpaid internships) a part of every degree, and a university precinct at the nearby Williamstown air force base, one of two in the country where F-35 fighter jets are stationed.

Despite this reality, the NTEU officials are trying to prevent a struggle against the Labor government's assault on the universities. They are attempting to keep workers straitjacketed in the framework of enterprise bargaining which accepts cost-cutting and restructuring as legitimate.

Staff at UoN have shown their willingness to wage a struggle against their difficult conditions. But for such a struggle to be successful they need to break politically from the union apparatuses, both the NTEU and CPSU, and form their own independent rank-and-file committee (RFC).

Such an RFC would develop demands on workloads, pay and conditions that staff and students need, not the "financially responsible" dictates and war preparations of management, the corporate elites and their parliamentary and trade union servants. And it would reach out, across all the universities, for a collective struggle for such demands.

To discuss how to form an RFC, please contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators' rank-and-file network:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)



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