

Australia: University staff strike in Newcastle

Our correspondents
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Academic workers at the University of Newcastle (UoN), two hours north of Sydney, went on strike for 24 hours and about 120 joined a protest rally last Wednesday, demanding an end to job cuts, intolerable workloads and pay cuts in real terms.

A day later, a similar stoppage and rally was held at University of Technology Sydney (UTS). The worsening conditions that are driving staff members to strike are the same across Australia, propelled by the Albanese Labor government's funding cuts and pro-corporate restructuring.

But the campus trade unions are trying to divert the discontent into negotiations with individual university managements for another round of enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs) that will only further facilitate Labor's agenda.

The speeches given by union officials at the Newcastle strike rally turned reality on its head.

Vince Caughley, secretary of the New South Wales division of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), portrayed the situation at UoN as an outlier, claiming that the university was financially stable, despite the Albanese government's cuts to funding and international student enrolments.

Labor has also maintained the Job-ready Graduates program, which doubles the cost of humanities courses and reduces funding to universities that deliver them.

Caughley covered up Labor's role, saying "the trouble lies in the vice chancellor and the executive. They are the sole source of your troubles." His only call was for the vice chancellor to resign.

This has been the bankrupt line of the NTEU nationally for the past 18 months as university managements have eliminated about 4,000 jobs, slashed courses for students—mainly in humanities—and intensified workloads for both academic and professional staff via restructurings to align with the Albanese government's Universities Accord.

At Australian National University, the vice chancellor did resign, but over 100 job cuts went ahead anyway,

mostly through supposed "voluntary" redundancies.

At Newcastle, 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.

Elizabeth Adamczyk, a Labor Party Newcastle City councillor and NTEU member, spoke at the strike rally, with no mention of her political affiliation. She said, "we deserve a pay rise" and lamented the pay cut in real terms in the last EBA.

Yet she said the NTEU is claiming a 3.5 percent pay rise per year. That is a step down from the 3.8 percent the NTEU called for in the last members meeting, which was itself a step down from the 5 percent in the log of claims that members actually voted for.

Adamczyk labelled the 3.5 percent claim as "about catching up from where we left behind, keeping pace with the real cost of living, and just doing a little bit better." In fact, it is a significant pay cut in real terms.

Inflation was reported to be 3.8 percent in January and is set to increase massively as a consequence of fuel shortages and price rises caused by the criminal US-Israeli war against Iran. This is adding to a historic cost-of-living crisis, some of the highest housing prices in the world, and a mortgage rate hike by the Reserve Bank of Australia announced last Tuesday.

Adamczyk described bargaining as complete at Western Sydney University and the Australian Catholic University, with 3.5 percent annual rises having been "won." The reality is that these are "in-principle" EBAs. They have not been voted on or even shown to staff, yet they are already being implemented by management to increase workloads.

NTEU UoN branch president Terrence Summers echoed the lie that 3.5 percent was inflation plus catch-up, and further proclaimed "real progress" in talks with management on workloads.

This "progress" is an offer from management for an itemisation of all tasks, which the union claims is a basis

for disputing workloads.

There was definite opposition to this during the last NTEU meeting. Members pointed out that such a proposal provides no concrete means of enforcing safe workloads, and will only trap workers in exhausting negotiations with management.

There were no proposals or even discussions of further action at the rally. This is a warning that the NTEU is preparing to wrap up the dispute and reach another sellout agreement with management.

The WSWS spoke with staff and students at the rally.

Jacqui, a staff member in the Purai Global Indigenous History Centre, commented: “I’ve heard from professors how crazy it is in terms of the teaching load. They have no time to do other things required for their KPIs, like writing articles, getting funding, publishing research. There is no time to do that.

“It’s a lot of admin, I can tell you. Every time they update systems, it seems like we end up doing more admin.”

Jacqui also spoke about the impact on students. “I work in the humanities, and it’s been hammered these last two years. When I was at university as a student I loved being able to dip into a whole bunch of different courses and work out what I wanted. Kids can’t do that much anymore. They’re very locked into a certain kind of course, and if they’re going to do humanities, they’re paying an arm and a leg.”

Jacqui supported expanding the strike across the sector. “That would be great,” she said. “Fantastic. It’s all about numbers. Divided we fall, united we conquer.”

A student, who wished to remain anonymous, agreed with the necessity for a sector-wide struggle, and spoke about the cost-of-living crisis.

“Just with rent being about \$300 a week, it’s a lot to manage. You have to work, you have to juggle responsibilities, and that makes things a lot harder.”

On the doubling of the cost of humanities courses under the Job-ready Graduates scheme, he said: “Humanities should be free. I reckon all education should be free. As it was. Healthcare and education should be free.”

At UTS, the management announced last month it will axe 121 academic jobs—about 10 percent of the UTS academic workforce—on top of around 200 professional staff positions, many by supposed “voluntary redundancies”.

That announcement came after the NTEU had diverted the anger and opposition of UTS staff and students, voiced at protest rallies last year, into a failed appeal to

the Labor government’s Fair Work Commission (FWC) for more time for consultation on the restructuring plan.

Across the country, the NTEU and the other main campus union apparatus, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), have opposed any unified action by staff and students against the job cuts.

The Labor government is starving the universities of adequate funding, along with schools, hospitals, the NDIS and other social programs, while allocating hundreds of billions of dollars for AUKUS submarines and other weaponry for a US-led war against China.

Labor’s Universities Accord insists that universities must transform both their teaching and research in partnership with employers, and in line with the building of an AUKUS-related war economy. It ties funding to universities signing “mission-based compacts” with Labor’s new Australian Tertiary Education Commission, above all to serve “national priorities” such as defence and critical minerals.

As the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators’ rank-and-file network, explained in our opening year statement, university workers need to build democratic rank-and-file committees (RFCs), independent of the union apparatuses, to fight for the conditions that they and students need, not what is deemed “fiscally responsible” by managements, the Labor government and the corporate ruling class.

RFCs can discuss and advance demands such as real pay increases to compensate for past losses, reverse the thousands of job cuts, stop the militarisation of universities, end the victimisation of educators who oppose Israel’s genocide in Gaza, defend free speech, and free first-class education for all students.

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