

Australia: What has happened to the enterprise agreement at Western Sydney University?

A Western Sydney University Rank-and-File Committee member
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Ever since the end of January, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has touted a vague “in-principle” agreement at Western Sydney University (WSU) as a pace-setting “win” for its members nationally.

This deal for a new 2026-2029 enterprise agreement (EA) was struck with management behind closed doors while many members were still away on summer leave. According to the NTEU, no details of the proposed EA would be finalised for weeks. It had to first be signed off by the NTEU national executive before NTEU members at WSU could be permitted to examine, discuss and vote on it.

Two months on, no copy of an agreement has been provided to NTEU members, let alone voted on. In the meantime, nevertheless, the WSU management is implementing the EA, as a fait accompli, with the NTEU’s assistance, including the imposition of job cuts and more onerous workloads.

There is widespread anger and concern among WSU staff members over severe under-staffing, including in student services, unfilled vacancies and increased workloads for academics.

The proposed EA is on top of the deal that the NTEU and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) struck with the management last August to allow its “Reset” restructuring to proceed, with the loss of nearly 200 jobs and the displacement of more than 700 professional staff.

This was part of the elimination of about 4,000 jobs across the university sector over the past 18 months. Yet the NTEU is presenting all this as a victory.

Such is the state of democracy, and misinformation, in the NTEU apparatus.

Most recently, NTEU general secretary Damien Cahill sent out an email to all NTEU members on March 19 claiming that: “With university staff across Australia bargaining for new enterprise agreements this year, union members at several universities have already secured strong pay rises, better job security, and new workplace protections.”

Under the heading “fair pay,” Cahill said members had “secured pay rises well above management offers,” citing the deal for rises of 3.5 percent per annum at WSU, alongside similar agreements at Adelaide University and Australian Catholic University.

Cahill’s email also boasted that these EAs featured “industry-leading rights to shape how generative AI is used” and “commitments from management to create new permanent roles, expand decasualisation, and strengthen workload protections.”

Based on what is known about the deal at WSU, these claims are all frauds.

The NTEU has still only sent its members at WSU sketchy PowerPoint slides of the proposed EA. What they show is that the “in-principle” EA features another real pay cut, no protection against further restructuring and a closer partnership between the unions and the management.

The only specific information is that the near four-year EA would provide nominal pay rises of just 3.5 percent annually. Even in January—before the Iran war—that was below the official Consumer Price Index (CPI), which had resurged to 3.8 percent over the year to December and was predicted by the Reserve Bank of Australia to reach 4.2 percent by June.

Now, as a result of the ongoing illegal war of unprovoked aggression launched by the US government against the people of Iran—which the Albanese Labor government has backed and sent a warplane, missiles and troops to join—fuel, energy, food and many other prices are soaring and inflation is predicted to soon reach 6 or 7 percent.

So much for the NTEU’s “fair pay!” It would continue the wage-cutting at WSU, as throughout the education workforce and the working class as a whole. The wage increases in the last EA imposed by the NTEU at WSU, covering 2022 to 2025, averaged less than 3 percent a year, while the CPI peaked at 7.8 percent in December 2022 and remained above 3 percent throughout the agreement’s life.

More broadly, workers' real wages throughout society as a whole have fallen in real terms for a decade, including under the Labor government, even as measured by the CPI, which does not count sky-rocketing house prices, mortgage payments and rents.

On academic workloads, the NTEU's slides show that the union has accepted management's demand for a universal 40/40/20 regime—that is 40 percent of hours for teaching, 40 for research and 20 for administration and governance—with managements able to “negotiate” to reduce an individual's research component down to 20 percent.

On professional staff workloads, the deal is even more vague, requiring only token bi-annual workload meetings in workgroups.

The wording on “Organisational Change”—a euphemism for further restructuring—is revealing. Far from job security, it provides for more “fill and spill” operations that force displaced staff members to compete against each other for reduced numbers of jobs.

According to the NTEU's own summary: “Unsuccessful applicants for new roles will receive detailed feedback on their applications. Where there are more applicants than positions in the new structure, there will be a mandated ‘comparative selection process’ assessing skills, experience and capacities.” That is, management will still pick and choose.

Another summary admits that the WSU management failed to meet its pledge in the last EA to reduce its use of casual employment by 25 percent. But the NTEU proposes only to renew that target. In reality, the academics who have been “decasualised” since 2022 have been subjected to excessive teaching workloads.

In return for the NTEU's services, the proposed EA will further entrench the union as a partner with the management. All “union representatives” will have their time off for “trade union training” increased from 25 to 35 days a year.

And management has agreed to include the union in a “consultative committee” on the use of AI, which is expected to destroy hundreds more jobs. In other words, the NTEU will facilitate and assist management to suppress resistance.

The PowerPoints speak of “a range of safeguards to employment in the introduction of AI.” But the worthless character of those “safeguards” is indicated by the example given—“a requirement to demonstrate what parts of PDs [position descriptions] are actually being replaced by AI during organisational change.”

As the WSU NTEU PowerPoints indicate, the proposed EAs offer no protection against the ongoing restructuring being implemented under the Albanese government. Instead, EAs operate as straitjackets, prohibiting industrial action

except during narrow union-controlled bargaining periods every three or four years.

The Labor government is cutting international student enrolments and 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 in preparation for more US wars, particularly against China.

Labor's Universities Accord, released in 2024, insists that universities must transform both their teaching and research in partnership with corporate employers, and in line with the building of an AUKUS-based 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 military projects and critical minerals.

As the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators' rank-and-file network, explained in our opening year statement, staff and students can only fight this offensive by breaking out of the trade union framework and building rank-and-file committees (RFCs), independent of the NTEU and CPSU bureaucracies.

RFCs can discuss and advance demands based on the needs of students and staff, not the dictates of management, governments and the corporate elite—such as real pay increases to compensate for past losses, reverse the thousands of job cuts, stop the pro-corporate and pro-military restructuring, defend free speech, and free first-class education for all students—as outlined in the statement.

To win such demands requires a broader necessary struggle against capitalism itself and its program of ever-greater oligarchic wealth and turn to war. It means a fight for democratic working-class control to reorganise society along socialist lines in the interests of humanity, not the corporate ruling class. To discuss these issues and how to form RFCs, please contact us.

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