

Australia: Union rams through sellout endorsement in small meeting at Western Sydney University

A WSU Rank-and-File Committee member
3 July 2026

In a sparsely attended National Tertiary Education Union online members meeting at Western Sydney University (WSU) on Thursday, NTEU representatives bulldozed through in a typically anti-democratic manner, a 45 to 18 vote, with 7 abstentions, to endorse proposed 2026–2030 enterprise agreements for academic and professional staff.

This was despite many objections in the Zoom chat to both the content of the sellout deal and the lack of time to discuss and debate it. The NTEU had released copies of the agreements only three days earlier, after five months of closed-door discussions with management. That gave staff totally inadequate time to read and properly review the documents—which have about 120 pages each.

Numbers of members reported in the chat that they had not even been notified of the meeting until the last minute. Others had difficulty accessing and downloading the documents.

The meeting was conducted, as usual, in a way that left no time for a debate after a lengthy and misleading report by the branch president, David Burchell. He claimed that the deal was a victory and that the WSU NTEU branch was “leading the charge” nationally.

In reality, the agreements inflict another four years of sub-inflationary pay rises—this time averaging just 3.5 percent, far below the soaring cost of living. They also impose more onerous workloads on both academic and professional staff and provide no protection from the kind of restructuring that saw nearly 200 jobs cut at WSU last year, along with almost 4,000 at universities nationally over the past two years.

The Western Sydney University Rank-and-File Committee will be campaigning for a “no” vote by

WSU staff, union and non-union members alike, when management puts the agreements to an all-staff ballot as required under the Fair Work industrial relations legislation.

This is all the more important because the NTEU national executive “approved” the WSU agreements even before they were posted for members to read. In fact, it hailed the sketchy “in-principle” versions of them in January as a pace-setting “win” for its members across the country.

That is a warning that the union is seeking to push through similar sellouts via enterprise agreements at other universities this year. Yet the small internal NTEU vote at WSU—45 “yes” votes in a workforce of more than 3,000—is not a credible basis for such a drive.

The tiny size of Thursday’s meeting was partly due to it being deliberately called suddenly, without adequate notice, and at a time when many staff members were either away for the mid-year break in classes or still embroiled in marking or finalising results for the Autumn semester.

The low attendance also reflected the union’s declining base of support, not least because of the deal that the NTEU and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), the other main campus trade union, struck with the WSU management last August to allow its “Reset” restructuring to proceed, with the loss of some 187 jobs and the displacement of more than 600 professional staff.

Backing Burchell, NTEU senior industrial officer Josh Gava said the 3.5 percent nominal annual pay rises were the most “achievable” nationally. Yet WSU staff have already suffered a wage cut of about 10 percent in real terms under the last union agreements struck in

2022 and the understated official inflation rate now exceeds 4 percent due to the ongoing criminal US-Israeli war on Iran.

After Burchell finally opened the meeting to discussion, with less than 15 minutes left of the scheduled time, a lecturer asked to speak. She began presenting an itemised contribution about the increased workloads, such as the preparation time for classes being slashed, compared to the 2022 agreement. Burchell soon cut her off, saying she could speak later against the agreement, knowing full well that almost no time had been left for a debate.

Long-time WSU academic Michael Head, a member of the rank-and-file committee, objected to Burchell's rude and anti-democratic treatment of the lecturer. He supported her exposure of the workload clauses, denounced the continued real pay cutting and pointed to clauses in the agreements on "job security" and "managing change" that are either meaningless or facilitate further job cuts and pro-corporate restructuring.

Both these interventions won support in the Zoom chat. Some members called for the lecturer to be given the right to speak. Others demanded time for debate. One branded the pay deal "a joke."

Such was the level of concern about the agreements, and the lack of time to consider them, that another academic moved a procedural resolution to postpone a vote until members had the time to review the documents.

Burchell branded the academic "naughty." He put the procedural resolution to an immediate vote, with no time for debate. He then declared it lost without divulging the voting numbers.

With the time set for the meeting already expired, Head insisted on the right to speak against the final motion to endorse the agreements but was only allowed two minutes. He said members should reject the sellout, like the Victorian public school educators had just done.

Head pointed out that the NTEU's proposed WSU "model" agreements were in line with the Albanese Labor government's 2024 Universities Accord agenda of totally restructuring the country's 39 public universities to satisfy the teaching and research requirements of the employers, the AUKUS military pact and other war preparations.

In such a small meeting, the 18 votes against the final rushed vote to endorse the agreements, and the 7 abstentions, reflect developing concern among educators over the role of the NTEU and other trade unions in enforcing the dictates of the corporate elite and its governments.

There is considerable anger among WSU staff members over higher workloads, unfilled vacancies and severe under-staffing, including in student services, student advising and IT services—all facilitated by the NTEU-CPSU deals with the management.

As the WSU Rank-and-File Committee and the Committee for Public Education, the educators' rank-and-file network initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, have warned, the Albanese government is starving the universities of adequate funding, along with public schools, public hospitals, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and other social programs, while allocating hundreds of billions of dollars for the military.

For decades, the NTEU and CPSU have imposed one enterprise agreement after another in the universities, cutting wages in real terms, driving up workloads and assisting restructuring.

Educators and students have to build new genuine democratic forms of organisation—rank-and-file committees, totally independent of the trade unions—that will develop and fight for demands based on their needs, and those of working people and society as a whole, not the dictates of the corporate ruling class and the plunge into war.

This is part of a broader international struggle for democratic working-class control to reorganise society along socialist lines in the interests of humanity, not the billionaires and the war machines.

To discuss these issues or to join and help build rank-and-file committees, contact us:

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