

Australia: Union-management sellout agreement passed at University of Newcastle

Our correspondent
29 July 2026

Assisted by the two main university trade unions, management at the University of Newcastle (UoN), two hours north of Sydney, succeeded last week in pushing through a new four-year enterprise agreement (EA) that imposes deeper real pay cuts, permits workload increases and facilitates further job cuts and restructuring.

Management's online ballot, endorsed by the unions, produced a vote of 96.2 percent of academics and 98.5 percent of professional staff in favour of the new agreement. But the turnout for the vote was only 31 percent of academic staff and 43 percent of professional staff, so the agreement has less than half positive support.

This outcome, after three limited strikes and 15 months of closed-door negotiations, is a warning of the retrograde EAs that the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) are trying to impose at Western Sydney University and other public universities across the country.

By the NTEU leadership's own admission on its website, the EA falls far short of even the key clauses in the union's authorised log of claims.

- **Wages:** The 15.2 percent pay rise over four years and four months to September 2029, or 3.51 percent a year, is well below the 5 percent in the log of claims that members voted for. This under conditions where even the official Cost of Living Index, which leaves out housing costs, is running at 4 percent and is set to rise further as a consequence of the criminal US-Israeli war against Iran.

- **Professional and academic workloads:** The NTEU was "not able to achieve" a clause to protect professional and academic staff from excessive and unpaid work by ensuring vacancies are filled within three months.

- **Academic workloads:** Likewise with a claim that Academic Work Allocation Models be developed in collaboration with staff and approved by a majority of staff in a work unit. Instead, management will supposedly explain the factors taken into account in determining

individual workload allocations. Even this will not be fully implemented until 2029.

- And management retains the power to alter allocations between teaching and learning, research and innovation, and leadership and engagement "to better reflect the duties required to be performed by the Academic Staff member," rejecting a claim that variations require mutual agreement.

- **Job cuts and restructuring:** No protection, just a meaningless promise by management to explore strategies and consider options other than redundancies. On "managing major workplace change," management only has to inform a professional staff member of any increase to workload and what it proposes to mitigate that.

- **Job Security for casuals and fixed-term staff:** No rights to be converted to secure employment. Instead, management will apply "categories of merit," such as "competencies," that guarantee nothing for workers seeking permanency.

All this is despite widespread discontent at UoN and overwhelming votes for industrial action, demanding an end to real pay cuts and intolerable workloads. After the last 24-hour stoppage in March and one more NTEU meeting in April, the union kept everything to backroom negotiations.

As for the CPSU, which primarily covers professional staff, it refused to call any stoppages whatsoever.

At the largely working-class UoN, like at all Australia's 39 public universities, hundreds of jobs have been destroyed in the past two years, with staff members compelled to compete for a smaller number of jobs. Last year, the unions stifled opposition to the UoN management's "Business Improvement Plan" restructuring that cut approximately 200 jobs.

At a strike rally in March, Vince Caughley, secretary of the New South Wales division of the NTEU, portrayed the situation at UoN as an outlier, claiming that the

university was financially stable, despite the Albanese Labor government's cuts to funding and international student enrolments.

Despite an election pledge in 2022, Labor has also maintained the Job-ready Graduates program, which sets fees of more than \$50,000 for three-year humanities courses and reduces funding to universities that deliver them.

Caughley echoed the cynical line of the NTEU nationally, designed to divert anger away from the Labor government as university managements have eliminated about 4,000 jobs, slashed courses for students—mainly in humanities—and intensified workloads via restructurings to align with the government's Universities Accord.

The unions are trying to channel the disaffection and frustration of university workers back into seeking EAs with individual university managements, thus isolating struggles such as the ones at UoN and Western Sydney University. Moreover, these agreements will facilitate further restructuring, just as the previous EAs have done.

This is all in line with the Albanese government's 2024 Universities Accord report, which insisted that universities must focus both their teaching and research on meeting the needs of business and "national priorities" such as the mining and processing of strategic critical minerals and the AUKUS military preparations for a US-led war against China.

This is a blueprint for the further commercialisation and militarisation of universities and the gutting of broad education in favour of subjects, including short micro-credential courses, that give students just enough skills to work for employers. The Accord proposed to tie university funding to "mission-based compacts" based on how well universities serve the designated national priorities.

For four decades, the NTEU and CPSU have imposed similar EAs in the universities, cutting wages in real terms and assisting restructuring. Like all the trade unions, they have transformed into arms of management, especially since the union Accords with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of the 1980s and 1990s.

Now the Albanese government is starving the universities of adequate funding, along with public schools and public hospitals, and gutting the National Disability Insurance Scheme—the biggest cut to a social program in Australian history—while allocating hundreds of billions of dollars for AUKUS and other war plans.

Staff at UoN showed their willingness to wage a struggle against their difficult conditions. But for such

struggles to be successful, university workers need to break politically from the union apparatuses, both the NTEU and CPSU, and form their own independent rank-and-file committees (RFCs).

RFCs will develop demands on workloads, pay and conditions that staff and students need, not the dictates and war preparations of the Albanese government, managements, the corporate elites and their trade union accomplices.

At Western Sydney University, the RFC has campaigned for a No vote on the proposed management-NTEU-CPSU EAs, and advanced demands such as pay increases of 35 percent to cover inflation and recover past losses, halt all increased workloads and cuts to class preparation times, permanency for all casuals who want it, free first-class education for all students and billions for education, not war.

These struggles can and must be connected to the rising working-class resistance internationally and in Australia to the assault on living and working conditions, as seen in the recent vote by Victorian public school educators to reject another sellout deal between the Australian Education Union and the state Labor government.

And RFCs in the universities and schools will reach out, throughout the working class, for a collective struggle for such demands, and link their struggles with those of workers worldwide through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

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)



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact