

No mention of Labor's agenda at Australian university staff strikes in Sydney and Melbourne

Our reporters
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University educators and professional staff members joined one-day or half-day stoppages at the universities of Melbourne and Sydney last week and the week before. They are fighting against ongoing real pay cuts, job destruction and rising workloads.

But the trade unions kept the strikes apart and remained silent on the underlying agenda of the Albanese Labor government that is driving the job cuts and pro-corporate and pro-military restructuring of the universities.

Last Wednesday, National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members at the University of Sydney struck for 24 hours and about 500 staff and students attended nominal picket lines across the University's Camperdown campus, urging people not to enter the grounds. On the previous Thursday, NTEU members at the University of Melbourne participated in a half-day stoppage.

In both cases, NTEU representatives kept the issues confined to seeking better deals with the individual managements in new enterprise agreements (EAs). At strike rallies, speakers made no mention of the near 4,000 jobs eliminated across the university sector over the past 18 months, driven by the Labor government's Universities Accord restructuring.

At Sydney, the NTEU said management had missed an opportunity to make concessions and avoid industrial action, yet reported that the bargaining talks were "not completely unproductive" and advanced the prospect of further negotiations.

The NTEU national executive has kept the pay claim limited to a 20 percent increase over three years, which means a further real pay cut compared to the soaring cost of living, which is being intensified by the criminal US-Israeli war against Iran, which the Labor government has backed from day one, February 28.

The union's log of claims also calls for consultation on the use of AI to destroy jobs, supposedly stronger protections for academic freedom and job security, as well as 17 percent

superannuation for the large number of casual workers.

Despite similar aims having been touted prior to the 2023 EA—which passed with a total pay increase of just 18.2 percent—workers have faced worsening conditions and pay cuts as inflation, particularly in basic consumer goods, continues to rise. The 2023 bargaining process involved the longest-running industrial action at an Australian university, yet the union-management deal that resulted has left staff under intense pressure.

As the current EA bargaining enters its fifth month, the NTEU says it remains "confident" of reaching an agreement within the year, while the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) refused to join the strike, instructing its members to attend work as usual.

Contrary to the NTEU's "confidence," an internal survey conducted in the arts and social sciences reported that an emphatic zero percent of staff agreed with the statement: "I trust the university to act in the best interests of staff, students and the broader community."

While addressing the picket line, NTEU leaders avoided any mention of the Labor government, instead trying to divert the discontent into criticism of the university's management.

New South Wales (NSW) division secretary of the NTEU, Vince Caughley, denounced the "excesses of the neoliberal university," saying that "there has been corporate capture of our universities."

Greens state parliamentarian Jenny Leong also targeted management as "just overpaid bureaucrats... doing the bidding of the property industry and the developers."

While Leong mentioned the imposition of draconian anti free-speech measures aimed against anti-Gaza-genocide sentiment on campus, she blamed "Zionists," not the federal and state Labor governments introducing and enforcing the legislation.

In his concluding remarks, Caughley joked about another strike before urging attendees to instead put "pressure on our

representatives in parliament”—promoting illusions in Labor and the Greens.

At the University of Melbourne, where about 300 people participated in a rally, NTEU national president Alison Barnes made a 30-second speech proclaiming empty “solidarity,” led some chants and said nothing about the nationwide assault on universities and staff conditions.

The NTEU claims in Melbourne are also confined to a 20 percent pay rise over three years, plus a four-day week for professional staff without loss in pay, faculty-level consultation on workloads and conversion pathways for casual staff into ongoing roles, alongside paid sick leave for casual workers.

NTEU branch president Elizabeth Strakosch said “the vice chancellor told us the university might lose its AA+ rating”—reflecting demands being made by the financial elite for cuts to university debt levels.

There was no mention of the fact that the Albanese government is starving the universities of adequate funding, including by cutting international student numbers to match the far-right anti-immigrant One Nation. Labor is also continuing the previous Liberal-National Coalition government’s cost-cutting Job-ready Graduates scheme, which charges students more than \$50,000 for a three-year arts or humanities degree to try to push them into science and technology courses to meet the needs of employers and the military.

On September 4, the day after the stoppage, Strakosch posted an Instagram video on the EA negotiations, underscoring the NTEU’s desire for a deal. She said that management had agreed to consultation clauses and intensive weekly bargaining. “They say they want a deal and so do we but it has to be meaningful on the issues that affect staff the most,” she said.

The kind of EA deals that the NTEU is seeking can be seen at Western Sydney University (WSU). As the WSU Rank-and-File Committee documented, the NTEU and CPSU pushed through EAs at WSU with small voting turnouts, imposing real pay cuts of 3.5 percent a year, increased workloads and no protection against further restructuring like the “Reset” that the unions agreed to last year, which axed nearly 200 jobs and displaced about 600 professional staff.

Likewise, at the University of Newcastle, a 96 percent “yes” vote for an NTEU-management EA deal concealed the fact that fewer than half the workforce voted on the agreement, which the NTEU itself admitted fell short on its own inadequate claims.

In fact, all these EAs are designed to cement closer relations between the unions and managements in implementing the Albanese government’s agenda—its pro-

corporate, military focused reshaping of tertiary education, as outlined in the Universities Accord.

This blueprint demands the subordination of both teaching and research to the government’s “national priorities,” including the AUKUS military pact against China and the mining and supply of strategic war-related critical minerals.

For funding, universities must now sign “mission-based compacts” with Labor’s new Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) to serve such priorities.

As part of this offensive, in May Education Minister Jason Clare invoked ministerial powers to veto and overturn Australian Research Council funding for 13 university research projects, citing national security concerns without further explanation.

Last month, Foreign Minister Penny Wong introduced an amendment to Australia’s Foreign Relations Bill to extend to individual academics her new powers to outlaw university relations with blacklisted overseas bodies or colleagues.

These moves highlight the Labor government’s creation of a witch-hunting wartime-like atmosphere in universities, directed against any research or teaching cooperation with institutions in countries deemed to be threats to Australian national security or foreign relations, particularly China, Russia and Iran.

Far from opposing this escalating militarism, the EAs being negotiated by the NTEU and CPSU throughout Australia’s 39 public universities will facilitate it by ensuring union collaboration with the managements and the outlawing of industrial action for the next three years under Labor’s Fair Work Act.

The unions are functioning as the industrial police of Labor’s program. To break out of this political and industrial straitjacket, educators and students need to build new independent forms of organisation—rank-and-file committees—that can develop and fight for demands based on social and human need, not the dictates of the capitalist elite and the war machine.

To discuss these issues, and for assistance in forming rank-and-file committees, 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