

Australia: Staff at 3 Brisbane universities hold joint stoppage but union limits demands

Our reporters
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About 500 staff members from Brisbane’s three main public universities took part in a joint half-day stoppage rally last Thursday in the Queensland state capital, opposing further real pay cuts, deteriorating conditions and pro-corporate restructuring.

Amid rising discontent among educators and professional staff, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) called the event as part of a push to secure a new round of enterprise agreements (EAs) at Australia’s 39 public universities.

While criticising university managements, the NTEU is seeking deals with them along the lines of the sellout EAs pushed through at Western Sydney University and several other universities in recent months.

The rally followed months of union-management talks and isolated industrial action at the University of Queensland (UQ), Griffith University and the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) for EAs to replace the previous three-year deals, which have already expired.

QUT staff, for example, have not had a pay rise since December 2024, and that was only 2.5 percent. That was far below the soaring cost of living, which has since intensified under the global impact of the criminal US-Israeli war on Iran—which the Albanese Labor government has supported and militarily assisted since it was launched on February 28.

Nevertheless, the NTEU national executive has kept the pay claims in all the union’s EA negotiations restricted to a 20 percent increase over three years. That means a further real pay cut, given that the official annual inflation rate, now up to 4 percent, understates the cost of fuel, food and housing for working-class households.

University managements have put forward even lower wage offers—such as UQ’s offer of a 12 percent

rise over four years—and applied to the Labor government’s pro-employer Fair Work Commission tribunal to shut down industrial action.

The NTEU’s logs of claims also call for other supposed “reasonable” provisions, such as consultation on the use of AI to destroy jobs, protections for academic freedom and job security, and 17 percent superannuation for casual teachers.

The last wave of such EAs in 2023 did nothing to prevent the elimination of nearly 4,000 jobs across the university sector over the past 18 months. This has been driven by the Labor government’s Universities Accord, which demands the subordination of both research and teaching to the requirements of employers and the AUKUS-related war machine.

Staff at universities in Sydney and Melbourne have also voted overwhelmingly for industrial action. But the NTEU and the other main campus trade union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), are keeping the struggles apart as much as possible, and cut off from strikes among public health workers, doctors, school teachers and other sections of the working class facing similar cuts.

The unions are also limiting their demands, in order to prevent a breakout of militancy that could challenge the Albanese government.

National NTEU president Alison Barnes was the lead speaker at Thursday’s rally, alongside Greens Senator Mehreen Faruqi and student union representatives. Like at similar rallies in Sydney and Melbourne last month, none of them mentioned the Albanese government’s restructuring, nor its latest cuts to international student enrolments, which are intensifying the financial pressure on universities.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, a QUT staff member condemned this silence: “Instead, it was

all focussed on the university managements, such as the high salaries of vice-chancellors versus the falling pay and rising workloads of staff.

“No connections were made to the universities becoming more integrated into the war machine. It was covering for the Labor government.”

She said the pay rise limit set by the NTEU was also “poor.” It meant another below-inflation increase.

While the unions blame individual managements for the worsening conditions, they also want closer partnerships with them.

The type of EAs that the NTEU seeks can be seen at Western Sydney University (WSU). As the WSU Rank-and-File Committee documented in detail, the NTEU and CPSU pushed through EAs at WSU, with small voting turnouts, imposing real pay cuts—a nominal 3.5 percent rise per 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.

All the EAs are designed to cement relations between the unions and managements in implementing the Albanese government’s agenda. The 2024 Universities Accord ties funding to the government’s “national priorities,” including the AUKUS military pact against China and the mining and supply of strategic war-related critical minerals. Universities must now sign “mission-based compacts” with Labor’s new Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) to serve such priorities.

The Albanese government is further starving the universities of adequate funding 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 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.

At the same time, the Labor government is creating a 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.

In August, Foreign Minister Penny Wong introduced an amendment to Australia’s Foreign Relations Bill to

extend to individual academics, as well as institutions, her new powers to outlaw relations with blacklisted overseas universities, research bodies or colleagues.

Far from opposing this militarism, the EAs being negotiated by the NTEU and CPSU will facilitate it by cementing union partnerships with the managements and outlawing industrial action for the next three years under Labor’s anti-strike Fair Work Act, which bans stoppages outside narrow bargaining periods.

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 will develop and fight for demands based on social and human need, including high-quality free education for all, 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:

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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