

Australia: Silence on Labor's agenda at University of Melbourne strike rally

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Academic and professional staff members at the University of Melbourne last week held their second strike this year, followed by a week-long ban on teaching. Around 750 staff and supporters gathered for a rally following nominal morning picket lines.

Amid rising discontent over deteriorating conditions and continued real pay cutting under the Albanese Labor government, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is seeking a new three-year enterprise agreement with the management, as it is at other universities across Australia.

Despite reporting intensive bargaining three hours per day, NTEU branch secretary Elizabeth Strakorssch said there had been “no movement” on “major issues.” The NTEU log of claims, operating within the limits set by the trade union’s national executive, calls for only a flat 20 percent salary increase over three years, despite soaring inflation fuelled by the illegal US war on Iran supported by the Labor government.

Many of the other claims are vague, such as “the Agreement will include provisions that protect staff against adverse effects of artificial intelligence systems” and, for professional staff, “the Agreement shall provide for enforceable workload protections and review procedures for staff.”

These claims are in line with what the NTEU pushed through recently at Western Sydney University (WSU), providing no protection against further pro-corporate and pro-military restructuring like that which has eliminated about 4,000 jobs nationally over the past two years. A similar sellout is being prepared at the University of Melbourne.

As the WSU Rank-and-File Committee documented in detail, the NTEU and the other main campus union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) rammed through enterprise agreements 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 “Western Reset” that the unions agreed to last year, which axed nearly 200 jobs and displaced about 600 professional staff.

The University of Melbourne employs more than 13,000 staff so the turnout at last week’s rally was low, indicating that many have little confidence in the trade unions after many bitter experiences, including during the opening phase of the COVID pandemic, during which the NTEU leaders opposed any unified struggle.

As at recent NTEU strike events in Sydney and Brisbane, no speakers mentioned the Labor government’s role in cutting funding, slashing international student enrolments and tying funding to the government’s “national priorities,” such as the AUKUS military pact and the mining of strategic minerals.

Instead, Sarah Roberts, the incoming NTEU national secretary, tried to divert discontent by accusing the university management of refusing to “find money for their staff” despite posting “a massive surplus in their most recent annual report.”

This is a cover for the Labor government.

From 2013 to 2023, federal funding for universities fell 2.4 percent in real terms even as enrolments grew by 18 percent. The Albanese government deepened these cuts in the 2026 budget, taking \$230 million from research and over \$600 million from Higher Education Support, while refusing to abolish the previous Liberal-National government’s cost-cutting Job-ready Graduates scheme, which charges arts and humanities students more than \$50,000 for a three-year degree, trying to coerce them into science and technology courses to meet the needs of employers and the

military.

This has been driven by the Labor government's 2024 Universities Accord, which demands the subordination of both research and teaching to the requirements of employers and the AUKUS-related war machine.

Universities must now sign "mission-based compacts" with Labor's new Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) to serve designated national priorities.

As a result, all the universities are under intense pressure, including Melbourne. At the start of August, the global credit ratings agency Standard and Poors, speaking on behalf of the financial markets, branded the university's adjusted 2025 surplus of \$38 million as a "razor-thin 1 per cent margin."

S&P warned that international student enrolments were threatened by "geopolitical tensions, currency movements or changes in visa rules." It declared: "[W]e expect [Melbourne] to respond by cutting discretionary spending, pulling back on [capital expenditure] and managing staff headcount—including holding vacancies for longer."

Jasmine Ali, a PhD student, assisted the distraction from Labor's agenda by saying that in the November state election there is "the prospect of a Liberal and One Nation government in Victoria. That is horrifying. That is horrifying to see."

In reality, the far-right, anti-immigrant One Nation has been able to gain traction only because of the attacks on working-class social conditions, including education and disability services, by the federal and state Labor governments, enforced by the role of the unions in stifling, isolating and suppressing opposition. This has allowed One Nation to falsely present itself as an anti-establishment party.

The line of focussing solely on the danger posed by One Nation without an explanation of the basis of its rise is a thinly-veiled call for the re-election of a big business Labor government in the state election.

After the rally, an education faculty member told the WSWs that the main issue is workload. He said the decline in conditions has been "like a death by a 1,000 cuts. It's just deteriorated slowly."

Asked about the need for a broader, unified working-class struggle, he replied: "I definitely agree that it's a system-wide issue and should not be seen in isolation. I

think we're all aware of that. We are operating in isolation from other professions. Other sectors are all being impacted by government funding decisions."

He said the rally was "a bit of a rah, rah speech," with "style over substance, really."

The enterprise agreements being negotiated by the NTEU and CPSU at the 39 public universities will facilitate further restructuring by cementing union partnerships with 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.

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.

To break out of the Labor-trade union political and industrial straitjacket, educators and students need to build new forms of organisation—rank-and-file committees—totally independent of the union apparatuses, that will develop and fight for demands based on social and human need, including decent pay and conditions and high-quality free education for all, not the dictates of the capitalist elite and the war machine.

Such committees are essential to link up with similar struggles of workers in the schools, hospitals and all industries against the militarist and austerity program, and with educators and other workers globally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

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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