Australia: Oppose union sellout at University of Melbourne

Our correspondent
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After two strikes, followed by a week-long ban on teaching last month, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is trying to seal another sellout deal with management at the University of Melbourne.

NTEU members at the university should reject the proposed enterprise agreement and vote no in a suddenly-called meeting of NTEU members on Wednesday. The deal will impose deeper cuts to wages compared to soaring inflation and intensify the partnership between the union apparatus and management in imposing further restructuring, including the use of AI.

The agreement will end industrial action on the eve of the November 28 Victorian state election. This is another move by all the trade union apparatuses to shut down workers' struggles, like those of schoolteachers, health workers and local council workers, against the austerity measures of the federal and state Labor governments.

It will also prevent industrial action at the university for almost four years, until April 2030, even as the federal Albanese Labor government continues to slash funding for the country's 39 public universities and transforms them to meet the demands of employers and the military.

On pay, the NTEU-management deal sets nominal rises of just 3.5 percent a year, well below the official inflation rate, which climbed to 4.3 percent last month, largely driven by the global impact of the criminal US-Israeli war on Iran, which the Albanese government supported from day one, on February 28.

In a sign of opposition, an NTEU member posted on the union's Instagram site: "14% increase over 4 years is abysmal. Everyone's real wages are way below where they were a decade ago due to a history of accepting these agreements that don't track inflation."

Far from protecting staff members from the use of AI to destroy jobs, the deal extends the consultation mechanisms between management and the NTEU on "major changes" to cover the introduction of AI. This gives union officials a role in overseeing AI's introduction alongside management, rather than opposing its use to eliminate jobs and intensify workloads.

The proposed deal also provides a green light to employ AI to eliminate jobs in "significant" measures that fall short of "major changes." All that is required is for affected employees to be informed "where reasonably practicable."

The agreement states: "Where a University AI system is materially relied upon in making a significant employment-related decision affecting an Employee, the University will, where reasonably practicable, inform the affected Employee of that use at an appropriate stage of the process."

The proposed agreement will allow management to continue to axe and casualise jobs. For example, it states a "shared objective" of management and the union "to maintain a Core Workforce FTE [Full Time Employment] of 75%." But that does not apply if there are "exceptional and unanticipated adverse impacts upon the University's financial circumstances (substantial adverse changes in Government funding, significant adversely changed economic circumstances and significant reduction in student enrolments)."

The NTEU is touting superannuation "equity" for casuals as the primary "win." But even the increase in their payments to 17 percent of their salary, the same as permanent staff, only starts in April 2029.

This agreement follows repeated sellouts over years. Before the last agreement in 2023, staff launched week-long stoppages—the longest at the university in decades—over wages, conditions and casualisation. But as the WSWS reported, the NTEU leadership wrote to the vice-chancellor pleading for a deal to head off further action. The union's headline demand was a 15 percent rise over three years—far below inflation.

Like all the trade unions, the NTEU confines workers to separate enterprise bargaining campaigns at individual workplaces, in line with Labor's "Fair Work" laws, which also prohibit strikes outside narrow bargaining periods.

Nearly 4,000 university jobs have been eliminated nationally over the past two years, while courses have been axed, especially in humanities, and workloads intensified. The NTEU, together with the other main campus union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), has opposed a unified struggle against the Albanese government's sector-wide offensive.

This job destruction is continuing. Last month, management at another Victorian university, Federation University, announced it will cut up to 87 percent of arts offerings from 2027. Social work and visual arts also face major cuts to their

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core subjects. Staff were called into a snap meeting with 10 minutes' notice and told the cuts would take effect immediately. Days later, Federation management claimed it anticipated "no job losses" but said it was under significant financial pressure in part because of the government "policy environment."

For years, successive Labor and Liberal-National Coalition governments have subordinated universities to big business, forcing them to depend increasingly on corporate revenue and exorbitant international student fees.

The Albanese government has stepped up this offensive. Its 2026 budget cut $230 million from university research and more than $600 million from Higher Education Support. Despite election promises, Labor has also retained the Coalition's Job-ready Graduates scheme, which has pushed the cost of three-year arts and humanities degrees above $50,000 while depriving universities of approximately $1 billion annually in teaching funding.

Universities face further cuts in their income from full fee-paying international students because Labor has imposed enrolment caps, trebled visa fees and increased visa application rejections to 40 percent as it seeks to outflank the far-right One Nation party in attacks on migrants, refugees and overseas students.

While cutting university funding, federal Labor is pouring around $60 billion annually into the military, with expenditure to rise further as Australia is integrated into US-led preparations for war against China.

The Albanese government's 2024 Universities Accord provided a blueprint for tying higher education to the requirements of the corporate elite and Australia's military build-up, including the AUKUS pact and preparations for war against China.

Universities must now sign "mission-based compacts" with Labor's new Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) to serve designated national priorities, which include AUKUS-related projects and the supply of strategic critical minerals.

The Labor government is also 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.

The NTEU has embraced this nationalist and militarist framework. Its recent report on university funding, while partially acknowledging Labor's cuts, said universities must serve Australia's "sovereign and strategic capacity." It declared that "national security depends on domestic breakthroughs in cybersecurity, geopolitics, advanced manufacturing and defence technology."

The attack on higher education is part of Labor's broader austerity offensive to pay for war preparations. The May budget outlined $63.8 billion in cuts over four years, including around $38 billion from the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), threatening essential support for hundreds of thousands of people with disabilities.

To fight for decent wages, secure jobs and free, high-quality public education as a fundamental social right, academic and professional staff, casual workers and students must establish democratically controlled rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions.

These committees must unite with schoolteachers, health workers and other sections of the working class against austerity, attacks on democratic rights and the diversion of billions into militarism and war. Such a struggle requires a complete break with the union apparatuses, which function as an industrial police force for managements and governments.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators' rank-and-file network initiated by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), is fighting to build such committees and unite educators with workers in Australia and internationally.

In the Victorian election, the SEP is also standing candidates, Morgan Peach, a SEP National Committee member and president of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) club at the University of Melbourne, and Peter Bryne, a long-standing SEP member, in the Melbourne Northern Metropolitan upper house region to take the fight for a socialist perspective out to the broadest layers of the working class.

University workers and students are urged to contact the CFPE to discuss this perspective and the formation of rank-and-file committees.

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