

Australian university staff face cuts to pay, jobs and basic rights

By Mike Head
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Enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) negotiations underway across Australia point to an intensifying push—driven by government funding cuts—to impose real reductions in wages, as well in the conditions of university workers, both academic and non-academic.

Students at the country's 39 public universities are also bearing the brunt of the offensive, facing higher fees, fewer and larger classes, fewer full-time teachers and worsening access to educational assistance and advice.

The federal Liberal-National government's latest multi-billion dollar cuts, set out in its May 1 "Higher Education Reform Package," remain stalled in parliament because of the widespread public opposition to the government's agenda of slashing education, health care and welfare.

But the university administrations are already accelerating the pro-business restructuring of higher education that began three decades ago and was stepped up under the previous Labor government's "education revolution."

At numbers of universities, managements are demanding the elimination of hard-won basic rights, including limits on workloads, casualisation and sackings, as well as restricting annual pay rises to around 1 percent—well below the official inflation rate of about 2 percent.

While claiming to oppose the assault, the trade unions that cover the universities, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), are seeking to keep workers in the dark about the magnitude of the attacks taking place nationally, isolate their members campus-by-campus and prevent or curtail any industrial action.

At Western Sydney University, for example, the administration is demanding a 1 percent annual pay rise in the next three-year EBA, plus the removal of restrictions on teaching hours and the employment of

casual staff, and the abolition of appeal mechanisms for dismissals for alleged misconduct.

The NTEU is seeking to confine staff members to the most limited forms of industrial action. On June 16, the union obtained an order by the Fair Work Commission (FWC)—the federal industrial tribunal—for a postal ballot to be held over the next month on a range of options that do not exceed work stoppages of between 5 minutes and 24 hours. The other options consist of token bans or partial bans on various duties, including performing unpaid additional work.

Such a ballot request is the clearest signal of the NTEU's determination to block any meaningful struggle against the university's demands and the underlying program—with which the NTEU agrees—to transform universities into corporate institutions subordinated to the profit requirements of Australian big business.

Similar management demands have been issued around the country over the past six months. Last December, Murdoch University in Western Australia applied to the FWC to terminate the existing union EBA without a new deal in place—a move that would overturn basic conditions and cut pay scales by up to 39 percent. That application is still proceeding, despite a token letter-writing campaign by the NTEU to convince the administration to resume EBA talks.

At nearby Curtin University, where EBA negotiations have gone on for 13 months, the NTEU has proposed no industrial action against the management's "non-negotiable" proposals for the removal of controls on academic workloads and misconduct or unsatisfactory performance dismissals, and for annual pay rises of just 1.05 percent. Instead, the union this month called on the management to conduct a ballot on its demands.

At other universities, because the unions have fragmented workers via the EBA process, back-room negotiations are still underway, or have yet to begin, on

agreements to cover the next three or four years.

The corporate restructuring of the universities dates back to the 1980s when the Hawke Labor government reintroduced fees, first for international students, then domestic students. The basic social right to free education at every level, including tertiary, was junked to turn universities into revenue-generating institutions servicing the vocational and research needs of the financial elite.

While enrolment levels have been substantially increased since then, in order to produce more highly-skilled graduates for employment purposes, public funding contributions per student have been cut by successive governments, both Labor and Liberal-National. This has made universities ever-more reliant on attracting corporate funds and recruiting full-fee paying international students.

In 1974, federal funding accounted for 90 percent of public university budgets. By 2010, the figure was 42 percent, and close to 20 percent in the so-called elite universities with the biggest corporate partners and wealthy donors. Meanwhile, international students have become cash cows, not only for universities but the capitalist class as a whole. In the past year they generated \$2.4 billion in income, making them the third largest source of foreign revenue after coal and iron ore exports.

Through its “reform package,” the federal Coalition government aims to intensify this process. In addition to the \$4 billion in federal funding cuts enforced since 2011–12, mostly under the previous Labor government, the plan will slash another \$2.8 billion over four years. This will include 2.5 percent annual “efficiency dividends” in 2018 and 2019, on top of a similarly damaging 3.5 percent “dividend” inflicted by the Labor government in 2013.

The government also plans to strip \$3.7 billion from universities by closing the Education Investment Fund, which pays for university facilities, including classrooms, research labs and student hubs.

These cuts—totalling some 10 percent of university budgets—will require the elimination of between 7,000 and 9,500 full-time jobs by 2021, or the replacement of an even greater number of full-time positions with part-time or casual employment.

Universities have long been slashing their full-time staff in order to cut costs and replace tenured academics with insecure and financially-stressed casuals, who are regarded as more compliant with management dictates.

Only 6.4 out of every 100 new full-time equivalent positions created at Australian universities between 2009

and 2015 were tenured teaching and research academic jobs. The share of teaching undertaken by tenured academics dropped from 46 percent in 2005 to less than 40 percent in 2015.

The government’s package will further blow out student-staff ratios, which have deteriorated from 15.6 to 1 in 1996 to 21.3 to 1. At the same time, students’ fees will rise by 7.5 percent, above and beyond the inflation rate, and graduates will be forced to pay back their fees, via the HELP loan scheme, at much lower salaries and faster rates.

Far from opposing the corporate transformation, the unions are its arch-exponents. Like the rest of the union movement, the NTEU has become an instrument for forcing sacrifices on its members to make Australian capitalism “globally competitive” in a world dominated by ruthless financial markets.

In its submission to a Senate committee inquiry on the federal government’s package, the NTEU’s criticisms centred on the impact on the universities’ money-spinning capacities. “Any additional cuts would put Australian universities, students and graduates at a competitive disadvantage globally,” it argued, and would be “detrimental to the capacity and reputation of Australia to sustain a world-class university system.”

This entirely nationalist outlook goes hand-in-hand with promoting Labor and the Greens as alternatives, and whitewashing the role of the 2007–13 Greens-backed Labor government. According to the submission, “Australian students and universities have already contributed close to \$4 billion in budget repair since the election of the Coalition government in 2013.”

In reality, Labor, assisted by the unions, implemented most of those cuts before it was thrown out of office in a landslide defeat in 2013.

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