

Australian universities exploit NTEU deal to slash facilities, jobs and conditions

By Mike Head
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University managements across Australia are escalating their cuts to campuses, jobs, pay and conditions in response to last week's national COVID-19 "heads of agreement" struck with the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU).

Employers have welcomed the opportunity to slash wages by up to 15 percent, and still impose forced redundancies and eliminate thousands of casualised jobs via the deal. At the same time, a number of the 39 public universities have decided to continue imposing their attacks outside the NTEU's national framework.

Either way, the employers are exploiting the NTEU's unprecedented offer of pay cuts to step up the drive to inflict the burden of the worsening global pandemic on the backs of university workers and students. They are taking full advantage of the union's role in suppressing the outrage and resistance of university workers while the NTEU pursued its backroom talks for six weeks on the sacrifices it volunteered to impose on its members.

On top of destroying the livelihoods of thousands of casual and contract teachers and professional staff, universities are unveiling campus closures and further job losses. Central Queensland University this week said it was shutting down three campuses at the Sunshine Coast, Yeppoon and Biloela and cutting its workforce by nearly 200 through "voluntary separations," while warning of further unspecified cost reductions.

Some managements, including at the largest universities, are confident they can individually carry out whatever attacks they want, with the union's help, via existing NTEU enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs) or variations to them.

In its statement, the University of Melbourne said it shared many of the NTEU's framework "principles" but did not need to resort to the measures permitted by the national deal, "such as stand downs, forced leave, forced reduction of hours, large pay cuts of up to 15 percent and

deferral of incremental progression."

Instead, "we remain committed to working collaboratively with the Union, and our workforce, to explore measures to fend off the real and present risk to jobs, and to the viability and success of the University."

Likewise, University of Newcastle vice chancellor Alex Zelinsky told staff last Friday the management would not participate in the national deal but would instead liaise with staff, including union representatives, to determine the "most appropriate measures" for the university.

Other universities that have indicated they may not sign up to the national deal with the NTEU include Sydney, Macquarie, Murdoch, Central Queensland, Sunshine Coast, Flinders, Edith Cowan, University of Technology Sydney and the Australian Catholic University. They will seek their own deals with NTEU branches, utilising or modifying EBAs that have already allowed them to axe jobs and conditions.

By April, one-third of casuals at the University of NSW had reported they had lost work. This reportedly cost them an average \$626 a week, and 42 percent were working unpaid hours. Correspondingly, the NTEU has permitted full-time staff to be pressured into working overtime so that the casuals can be laid off.

This ongoing collaboration by the NTEU with the employers further exposes the fraud of the "day of action" proposed for tomorrow by the NTEU and the pseudo-left groups, which are trying to prop it up in the face of the anger of university workers over its sellout.

Protests, such as car cavalcades to government offices, are planned on the basis of the slogan, directed to federal Education Minister Dan Tehan: "You have one job Dan! Save higher ed." NTEU members are being urged to send "selfies" (self-portraits with placards) and messages carrying that slogan to the union, for it to relay to Tehan.

The reality is that Tehan is doing exactly the job he has been assigned by the Liberal-National government and

the political establishment as a whole: That is, to use the pandemic to accelerate years of funding cuts, initiated by the Labor-Greens government of 2010 to 2013, and accompanying measures to transform universities into business corporations serving the interests of the corporate elite.

While pleading with Tehan and the government for a “rescue package,” the NTEU is underscoring its ongoing agreement with the underlying corporate agenda of completely turning tertiary education into a lucrative revenue-generating industry, while servicing the narrow job training requirements of big business.

That is the true meaning of another NTEU “day of action” slogan: “We’re not going to let our sector hit the wall without a fight.” This “sector” is Australian capitalism’s third highest export earner, bringing in more than \$30 billion a year, much of it from full fee-paying international students.

As for “without a fight,” that corresponds to the pleas of the pseudo-left groups, such as Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative, which have implored the NTEU leadership to at least appear to put up a fight against the government and the cuts in order to contain the outrage of university workers and students.

Aware of the widespread hostility to the NTEU’s agreement, these groups have felt compelled to advocate a “no” vote when the union puts the deal to a proposed national plebiscite of its members. At the same time, they are promoting the “day of action” and advising the very same union that has orchestrated this attack to put on a show of resistance in order to try to keep a political and organisational grip over university workers.

Socialist Alliance’s *Green Left Weekly* this week anxiously fretted that the NTEU had “not led with a general fight for jobs across the sector, opting to focus on collaboration through negotiation.” It said if the union conducted “a social and industrial fight,” that would provide the NTEU with “opportunities for organising, mobilising, building student and community support and securing a better outcome.”

In the same vein, Socialist Alternative’s *Red Flag* insisted that, despite the NTEU’s support for wage-cutting, university workers had to rally behind the union, because: “If you’re on the side of workers, then you support unions.” It suggested “modest” protest actions to “throw some sand in the gears of the processes that are reducing our wages and conditions” and to “increase the unions’ ability to engage in sustained strike action.”

This is a cynical cover for the unions. For the past three decades, ever since the unions enforced the prices and incomes Accords and “enterprise bargaining” assault of the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996, the unions have systematically suppressed strikes to their lowest level for a century.

In response to the global capitalist breakdown triggered by the pandemic, the unions are now taking their class collaboration to its logical conclusion, summed up by Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus, who vowed to give the employers “everything they want.”

Irreconcilably opposed to these anti-working class apparatuses and their pseudo-left satellites, the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the Socialist Equality Party advocate the formation of Action Committees of workers and students at universities, independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions, to oppose these attacks.

We call for a unified struggle against the assault on jobs, pay and conditions and for the basic social right to free, first-class education for all students, including international students, and full-time jobs for all university workers.

This means a struggle to completely reorganise society along socialist lines, including the allocation of billions of dollars to public education, instead of big business and the wealthy elite being bailed out by huge “stimulus packages.”

A video of the CFPE’s May 17 forum [\[link\]](#) “The COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis in the universities” is available on the CFPE Facebook page. Education workers can contact the CFPE via the Facebook page or its Twitter account, @CFPE_Australia, or email the SEP at sep@sep.org.au.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>