

Management and NTEU prepare to cut jobs and conditions at Australia's Newcastle University

By John Harris
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The University of Newcastle (UoN), north of Sydney, last month announced course cuts and faculty restructures, blaming the COVID-19 pandemic. The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is working with management to implement cuts to pay and jobs.

Negotiations between the union and management broke down but further moves are likely to try to overcome the opposition from university workers and students. Around the country, the NTEU is stepping up its collaboration with the employers to impose deep cuts.

Vice-Chancellor Alex Zelinsky announced the merger of five faculties into three, accompanied by reductions in courses. The names and make-up of the new super-faculties are yet to be unveiled, but the change is due to be completed by the end of the year.

Zelinsky said management had reached an “in-principle agreement” with the NTEU to reduce annual leave, cut long service leave and offer an early retirement scheme. These measures include a requirement for staff to take 10 additional days of annual leave in 2021.

The union sought to frame the measures as necessary to protect job security. NTEU branch secretary Dan Conway said: “The NTEU has taken the unprecedented step of negotiating some temporary reductions to staff pay and conditions at universities during the COVID-19 health crisis.”

In a statement on August 10, the NTEU feigned concern that the restructure would lead to job losses. At the same time, it said it was “willing to countenance temporary measures that are proportionate to the university’s broader financial issues.” In other words, the union will accept cuts to both jobs and conditions.

This followed an all staff forum on August 7, where Zelinsky declared that job cuts for both full-time and casual workers “without a doubt will happen.”

The union is working closely with management. In internal NTEU correspondence with Zelinsky on August 10, Conway said the two parties had been in discussions for two months to secure an agreement.

Conway said the union’s most pressing concern was Zelinsky’s disregard for the “consultation obligations under the Enterprise Agreement.” This concern has nothing to do with the defence of the interests of workers. On the contrary, the NTEU is preoccupied with maintaining its seat at the bargaining table, shoring up its function as an industrial police force.

Conway outlined the union’s national role in finding and enforcing cost-cutting measures. “It is the NTEU that has produced detailed drafting to facilitate moving to finalise the discussions,” he wrote, “[in] regard to the development and content of enterprise agreement variations across the sector during the COVID-19 period.”

An August 5 draft NTEU Memorandum of Understanding said no staff member would be made “forcibly redundant” as a cost-cutting measure “not connected to a reduction in work.” That opens the door for forced redundancies if courses are reduced.

Similarly, the document allowed for the destruction of casuals’ jobs. It said “regularly employed casual staff who had reasonable expectations of future work will continue to be employed where there is work required to be performed.”

Zelinsky’s restructuring announcement dovetails with the university’s “course optimisation” program, which embraces the federal government’s proposed

doubling of fees for humanities students. The government's measures would direct students into courses that big business considers "essential," such as science, maths, agriculture, IT, engineering, teaching and nursing. Zelinsky said this would save UoN between \$15 million and \$20 million per annum.

Earlier in the year, UoN forecast a \$58 million reduction in revenue for 2020, with further financial impacts anticipated in 2021 and beyond. Zelinsky said the university needed to find \$35 million in savings in 2021.

Universities have been starved of funds for years, with billions of dollars cut by every government beginning with the Greens-backed Labor administration of Julia Gillard from 2010 to 2013. The pandemic has deepened this assault by affecting the revenue provided by high-fee paying international students.

Students and staff also have begun a return to face-to-face teaching at UoN and other universities, threatening the health and lives of staff and students. This reopening is part of the broader rush by the corporate elite and its governments to lift all public health restrictions in order to generate private profits.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) are calling for students and university workers to establish democratically elected joint rank-and-file safety and defence committees. These committees must be independent of the NTEU and all the unions, which have shown they are nothing more than apparatuses to straitjacket workers and impose the demands of big business.

These committees are essential to develop a unified struggle by university workers and students for the defence of jobs, health and conditions against the dictates of the financial elite and the management-union bloc. This is bound up with fighting for the right to free high-quality education, including for international students, and full-time permanent jobs for all university staff.

Above all, this means a struggle against the capitalist profit system, guided by a socialist program and perspective, that is, the total reorganisation of society on the basis of human need, not corporate profit.

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