

Australia: Amid rising discontent, a one-day stoppage at University of Newcastle

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Workers at the University of Newcastle (UoN), in the industrial city north of Sydney, went on strike for 24 hours on September 21, in opposition to cuts, higher workloads, unpaid overtime and increasing casualisation and insecure work.

After months of delays, and a 97 percent vote in July for industrial action, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) called the limited stoppage to seek a deal with management for an enterprise agreement to replace one that expired over a year ago.

The strike is another indicator of a growing desire by tertiary education workers to fight after decades of cuts. On the same day there were strikes at the University of Technology Sydney and some Technical and Further Education (TAFE) campuses across New South Wales.

On October 13 and 14, University of Sydney staff will strike for the fourth time this year. University of Queensland workers struck on September 1. Workers at other universities, including Griffith, James Cook and Queensland University of Technology have voted for industrial action, but the NTEU is keeping each struggle separate.

The union has continued to trade off conditions to meet management demands. When the COVID-19 pandemic first hit in 2020, the NTEU volunteered thousands of job cuts as well as cuts of up to 15 percent across the country.

At UoN, the NTEU's log of claims permits further pro-corporate restructuring and cost-cutting. Under "job security," it states that "redundancy only occurs when the work is no longer required to be performed by anyone." That would allow management to cut jobs "no longer required."

Under "organisational change and redundancy," the NTEU says the "agreement should specify that no individual should be subject to organisational change

affecting their employment more than once in the life of the Agreement." This would still allow restructures to go ahead.

UoN management is "offering" a 2 percent per annum pay increase, far below the official inflation rate of more than 6 percent. It is also demanding a new employment category called "Academic Periodic Employment"—essentially casual positions without the 25 percent casual wage loadings.

Management is also pushing for the 25 days of annual leave to be split into "sick and carers" leave of 15 days and "life leave" of 10 days. This is aimed at limiting the amount of leave workers can take.

At the strike rally, the NTEU touted its proposed Western Sydney University (WSU) enterprise agreement as "a way forward," claiming it would convert a third of casuals to ongoing employment.

This is false. The NTEU's WSU deal would merely give casual academics first preference in applying for approximately 150 full-time jobs, leaving management the power to decide who is selected. The deal also drops demands for 17 percent superannuation and paid sick leave for casuals.

Moreover, there has yet to be a staff vote at WSU on the agreement, which proposes pay rises averaging just 3.5 percent per year. That is a substantial real wage cut, in line with the demands of the Reserve Bank and the federal Labor government.

Throughout the rally, the NTEU sought to tie university workers to the Albanese Labor government and the Greens. The rally host read out speeches submitted by Labor MP Tim Crackenthorp and Greens Senator Mehreen Faruqi.

But the last Greens-backed Labor government of 2007 to 2013 imposed a market-driven "education revolution" of pro-corporate restructuring, cut billions

from higher education and accelerated casualisation.

That forced universities to compete for enrolments and tailored teaching programs to employer demands. Universities became dependent on cramming students, especially full fee-paying international students, into their campuses.

University of Newcastle Students Association (UNSA) president Jess Philbrook made perfunctory remarks at the protest. Established bureaucratically under the direction of the university administration, UNSA replaced the former student associations in 2020.

Last year, amid hostility from students to the university's cuts, UNSA held management "consultation" sessions which provided senior university executives a platform to justify restructuring at the university as "unavoidable."

This led to severe cuts, with upwards of 500 casual staff losing their jobs between 2020 and 2021, along with over 164 full-time equivalent (FTE) academic staff and 61 FTE professional staff. On the back of these attacks, UoN recorded a surplus of \$185.2 million in 2021.

Nationally the NTEU has refused to call for the reinstatement of lost jobs and courses, and continues to divide workers up university-by-university. The union has opposed demands by members of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) for a unified struggle against the onslaught on jobs and conditions, which is continuing under the Labor government.

NTEU officials have told members repeatedly that no industrial action can be taken outside of enterprise bargaining periods, because of the anti-strike Fair Work Act. But that was introduced by the last Greens-backed Labor government with the complete support of the trade union bureaucracy.

Together with the CFPE, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) calls for a unified struggle of university workers and students against the deepening cuts. We warn that no step forward can be taken through the unions, which have shown that they are nothing more than apparatuses to impose the essential demands of university managements.

To break out of the NTEU's political and industrial straitjacket, university workers and students need to establish rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, so workers can take matters into their own

hands and coordinate their struggles with workers everywhere.

This means building the CFPE, the educators' rank-and-file organisation, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

We urge students and university workers everywhere to establish such rank-and-file committees. This is bound up with fighting for free high-quality education for all, and for the right to secure permanent work for all university staff, as part of a socialist perspective that rejects the dictates of the corporate elite.

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