

# Australian university union tries to impose sellout at Western Sydney University College

**Our reporter**  
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For weeks, National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members have been bombarded with emails from the union proclaiming an “historic win.” The NTEU has hailed a proposed enterprise agreement at Western Sydney University (WSU), even though staff have yet to vote on the retrograde deal, which features deep real wage cuts.

The Australian university trade union’s false claims were further exposed at a sparsely-attended NTEU meeting last week at Western Sydney University The College (WSUTC), where union officials sought to push through an even worse enterprise agreement (EA).

WSUTC is fully owned by WSU as a pathway provider into the university. Staff at WSUTC have been without an EA since 2016, which has resulted in a virtual wage freeze over the past six years.

The union’s negotiations for a new EA have been stymied by members’ rejection of management proposals and scepticism bound up with the union’s long record of betrayals.

When the COVID pandemic emerged in early 2020, the NTEU, without consulting its membership, volunteered wage cuts of up to 15 percent and around 18,000 job cuts on the pretext of preventing greater job losses at universities.

Despite a widespread membership revolt against this brazen sellout, the NTEU nevertheless continued to impose salary and job cuts at most universities, including WSU, while opposing a unified struggle to defend jobs, pay and conditions. At WSU, the cuts to 400 jobs and wages led to a record surplus of \$143 million in 2021, up from \$22 million the previous year.

Now, an even greater assault is underway at WSUTC, as part of a wider NTEU bid to inflict its “historic win” at WSU. The first WSUTC management proposal was rejected by more than 80 percent of The College’s teachers and professional staff.

The NTEU called last week’s members’ meeting to endorse a “new” proposed agreement before it goes to a formal vote of the entire WSUTC workforce, as dictated by the Fair Work Act.

From the outset, NTEU WSU branch president, David Burchell, sought to stifle opposition by unilaterally rejecting a motion by a Committee for Public Education (CFPE) supporter for members to be allowed five minutes to speak. In typical anti-democratic fashion, Burchell declared that a two-minute limit would apply, effectively making serious discussion and debate impossible.

The meeting was a debacle, however. Out of a claimed NTEU membership of more than 80 at The College, only 19 were present for the final vote. Of these, 11 voted for the proposal, six abstained and two voted against—hardly a vote of confidence in the deal or the increasingly distrusted NTEU.

The CFPE supporter called for the proposal to be opposed, explaining that the provisions were regressive. For instance, she said, after six years of below-inflation wage rises, the proposed increases are less than half the official inflation rate (6.8 percent)—just 2 percent this year, 3 percent in 2023 and 3.25 percent in 2024.

The proposals for personal leave are even worse. Staff absences of one day on more than five occasions without evidence of illness or injury would require the employee to provide evidence for personal leave for the next year for single day absences, with non-payment for non-compliance. This proposal was, according to the NTEU, imported from the supposed “historic win” at the university.

Proposals for managing ill health are similarly retrograde. Employees deemed medically unfit to return to work for a period of 12 months could have their employment terminated. Members at the meeting were alarmed by this proposal, pointing out that some people would likely return to work earlier than medically advised

in order to not lose their jobs.

The casual conversion proposals are so vague as to be meaningless. Clause 15.3 (a) states that casuals have the “right to seek conversion to ongoing or fixed term employment.” However, fixed term employment could be for one trimester, which is 12 weeks.

If employed for more than three years as a Fixed Term Employee, the employee would be entitled to make a written application for ongoing full-time or part-time permanent employment. Such a clause would leave management the option of selecting who would be appointed to permanent employment, out of the dozens of casuals currently employed.

Moreover, the recent conversions at WSUTC consist of formerly casual employees being permanently employed, but only for two days a week! The salary for such employment is close to the poverty line. Many academics employed on this basis continue to work as casuals at other institutions in order to make ends meet.

Casuals also would no longer be paid for public holidays if they fall on rostered days of work.

One casual academic asked why the proposal would enable WSUTC to employ casuals for two hours of work instead of the current minimum of three hours. She was told she would have to negotiate this with her coordinators or managers. She questioned why she should have to negotiate on an individual basis if the EA was supposed to be a collective agreement.

Mandated annual leave, which currently applies to teaching staff, would apply to professional staff as well, dictating when they can take leave, in order to save WSUTC money. When a professional staff member opposed this, the NTEU delegate declared it was unfair that mandatory leave only applied to teaching staff.

The CFPE supporter and the professional staff member both pointed out that the proposal would make workers all equally worse off. The delegate replied that the NTEU considered this to be a necessary compromise.

Another proposal was for annual leave approvals for the month of January to be “limited and subject to The College’s operational requirements, unless there are exceptional circumstances.” Staff members opposed this, because it would particularly disadvantage those with school-aged children, who have school holidays from December to late January.

The CFPE supporter said the NTEU was only negotiating for what the university said it could afford, and not what workers were entitled to. She explained that the NTEU was aligning with the federal Labor

government, which is planning further restructuring through its accord with employers and the unions.

She called for the formation of rank-and-file committees to unite workers for a broader struggle against the corporatisation and commercialisation of universities and against the rotten deals brokered by the NTEU on behalf of university managements.

Burchell tried to mock the CFPE supporter, saying a “global Trotskyist revolution would be great” but this was not possible nor was it being discussed at the meeting. This was a deliberate attempt to intimidate opposition, but only underscored the pro-management and pro-capitalist character of unions, including the NTEU, and the need for a socialist alternative to them.

As union representatives admitted, NTEU meetings at the university and The College have been getting smaller. The CFPE supporter said the low attendance revealed the level of disillusionment, with workers seeing the NTEU as an obstacle to the defence of jobs and conditions.

The CFPE and the Socialist Equality Party urge WSUTC workers to vote “no” on the union’s deal with management and to link up with all WSU workers to defeat the draft WSU agreement as well.

Far from an “historic win,” the NTEU’s WSU deal 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.

Nor is the WSU deal any victory for casuals. It would merely give casual academics first preference in applying for approximately 150 full-time jobs over three years, leaving management the power to decide who is selected. The deal also drops casuals’ demands for 17 percent superannuation and paid sick leave.

Rejecting these NTEU betrayals would be a crucial first step in fighting the corporate-driven restructuring of tertiary education, at the expense of workers and students, now being deepened by the Labor government. To discuss how to take forward this struggle contact the CFPE:

Email: [cfpe.aus@gmail.com](mailto:cfpe.aus@gmail.com)

Facebook: [facebook.com/commforpubliceducation](https://www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation)

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To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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