

After week-long strikes, NTEU seeks deal with University of Melbourne management

Our correspondents
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After seven days of stoppages by workers at the University of Melbourne last week, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) wrote to the vice chancellor and his deputies this week to express its “exasperation” at their failure to make a “revised job security proposal.”

The strikes—the longest at the university in decades—saw academic and professional staff alike fighting for better wages, conditions and against the widespread casualisation across the country’s universities.

The NTEU letter asked the management to honour its supposed “public commitments” over the past two years to make a “job security” offer in order to finalise an enterprise agreement with the union, based on the “NTEU’s Heads of Agreement proposal,” tabled on August 8.

In reality, the management’s statements, going back to a 2021 submission to a Senate committee inquiry, have never amounted to more than vague words about setting a “desired profile” for its workforce, more than half of which is casualised.

The letter signed by NTEU industrial officer Jacob Debets and the University of Melbourne acting NTEU branch president Chloe Mackenzie, amounted to a plea for management to finalise a deal with the union as quickly as possible to head off further industrial action.

It said the NTEU would not attend any more negotiation meetings, which have been conducted since last August, until the university provided a new job security proposal. It insisted that the “parties” had already agreed on “the necessity to overhaul the University’s insecure workforce model.”

About 750 staff joined a half-day NTEU strike rally last week, with workers from several faculties and departments staying on strike for five or seven days. The week-long stoppages indicate the willingness of workers to fight the deepening assault on pay, working conditions and jobs.

They also voiced their opposition to the pro-corporate restructuring of universities, which the Labor government of Anthony Albanese is continuing via its University Accord process.

The NTEU and the other main campus union, the Community and Public Services Union (CPSU), have struck regressive deals with managements at 19 separate universities over the past year, but university workers elsewhere across the country are still fighting over retrograde proposed contracts. This is coming amid an international upsurge of working-class struggle in response to the global cost-of-living crisis.

The NTEU and CPSU leaders are trying to contain and isolate the strikes within the confines of seeking new management-union enterprise agreements. For decades, these union bureaucracies have allowed the decimation of working conditions, wages and jobs.

The two unions have worked closely with the Labor Party which, under the previous Greens-backed governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, imposed a pro-business “education revolution” and then inflicted the largest-ever single cut to higher education funding.

At the August 28 strike rally, NTEU University of Melbourne branch president David Gonzalez said there was no agreement with management on “major issues,” including the NTEU’s headline claim of 80 percent secure employment for staff employed by the university “on a headcount and FTE [fulltime-equivalent] basis.”

The union is calling on management to “do what is reasonably practicable” to prevent staff from being overworked—an essentially meaningless demand. Under conditions of the worst cost-of-living and housing affordability crisis in a generation, the NTEU is proposing a “minimum” of a 15 percent rise over three years. That would be far below the inflation rate.

The NTEU is seeking to isolate the struggle at the University of Melbourne, even as university workers in the same city join industrial action.

Swinburne University workers took a half-day stoppage on August 30, their first strike in a decade. At RMIT University, workers’ contracts expired nearly two years ago in its higher education division. Vocational training staff contracts at RMIT lapsed nearly four years ago. On August

31, about 250 RMIT NTEU members held a stopwork meeting, striking for half a day. Monash University staff stopped work for half a day this week.

The NTEU is trying to prevent these struggles from breaking out of its control as it pleads with managements to finalise enterprise agreements through backroom negotiations.

University of Melbourne strikers spoke with the WSWS at the August 28 rally.

Bill, a digital humanities researcher since 2001, had been on casual contracts for the past 15 years. “You don’t have much choice but to accept those terms, but the workload is still full-time,” he said.

“You need full-time pay for your rent or your mortgage, so you have to take another part-time job and you end up working 10-hour days and on weekends. So many people are desperate, trying to make their rent and their mortgage or even buy groceries at the moment.

“Over the last 20 years the strength of the union has been undermined and we have lost decades or even a hundred years of progress in terms of fair working conditions and a quality standard of living. The eight-hour day is no longer a thing, not just in universities. Taxi drivers work 12-hour days.”

Bill raised concerns about the role of the NTEU in dividing workers at different universities.

“The NTEU isn’t restricted to this one university so they could at least have had some solidarity. Ultimately, if they do keep making it harder and harder for people to speak and act, people will have no recourse but to work outside of the union and to do other things.”

Alex, a casual mathematics tutor, said: “There is no job security, and I don’t know if I’m going to have work next year. That makes my moving out of home plans harder because I don’t know if I’m going to be able to support myself. On top of that, I don’t get paid for 26 weeks of the year.”

We asked Alex what he thought about the fact that the strike was isolated from the other struggles of university workers across the country, including at Sydney’s Macquarie University, where an independent rank-and-file committee has been formed.

Alex commented: “I think the NTEU postures that they are ‘the same struggle’ but in action they do nothing to link up all our struggles together—even though casualisation is across the whole sector.

“I think the union bureaucracy has its own interest to preserve itself. If we unite as one sector, across all the universities, maybe the union thinks we have a little too much power and they couldn’t control the direction of things.

“A week-long strike is unprecedented in academia. It’s the longest strike since the stonemasons walked off [at University of Melbourne] in the 1850s.

“The reason we are here today is because the rank and file are pushing against the union bureaucracy. If this wasn’t happening, I’m sure we would have held another token strike and nothing would have gotten there.

“We need more of this and we need these rank-and-file members to organise not just within their own faculties. Obviously, that’s a great start, but then start talking to other faculties. Once we get that going, we need to start talking between universities, then internationally.”

James, an arts student, said he was attending the strike because his father is a teacher at a primary school, and he wanted to support other educators engaged in industrial action.

“I think it’d be really good to see tutors from different universities who are suffering underpayment and fight on a general consensus. This has to be not just from the University of Melbourne but also from RMIT, from Monash, from Sydney—all over the country, I think. Even better, a general strike.”

The Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee issued a statement and held a forum this week exposing the details of the proposed NTEU and CPSU agreements at Macquarie and calling for “a unified struggle across the sector, reaching out to other workers, including our Melbourne colleagues, teachers and healthcare workers, for support and joint action.” It said: “For that we need rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the union apparatuses.”

If you agree, contact the Committee for Public Education to discuss setting up a rank-and-file committee at your university or workplace:

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