

Rank and File Action (RAFA) Challenges NTEU National Pay Claim Limit

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The Rank and File Action (RAFA) collective in the NTEU University of Sydney Branch challenges the NTEU National Executive's recent decision to limit the pay claim individual branches of the NTEU can pursue in their logs of claim.

RAFA seeks to energise individual branches and to give agency to the activists who power them. As such, we take issue with the National Executive's restrictive decision and we commit to pressuring the NTEU National Executive to review their decision in the following ways:

- informing members of their rights to challenge, and processes for challenging, the recent National Executive decision, thereby strengthening the democratic processes of the union
- building cross-branch networks that can genuinely participate in the making of such decisions, thereby empowering rank and file members more broadly and improving ground-up consultation
- raising support for a National Council proposal and/or plebiscite that can return decision-making on such important issues to members around the country

More information on the background of the National Executive's decision and our reasons for taking issue with their stance are below.

NTEU National Executive Decision

In this round of the NTEU's enterprise agreement negotiations, all branches have been required to put in a mandatory pay claim. In 2020, National Council set this as precisely 12% over the life of the agreement (just over three years). This means no branch can set a higher or lower claim. This year, due to rising inflation the national executive has amended this decision twice. After it was increased to 15%, union members at USYD pushed for a CPI + 2.5% per annum pay claim, believing that 15% risked binding union members to receiving a real pay cut. Following this pressure, Nat. Exec. changed the pay claim again to either "*the higher of 15% (flat rate, from expiry date of the previous agreement to expiry date of the new agreement), or Consumer Price Index (CPI) + 1.5% per annum*", or an optional lower claim.

At the University of Sydney, where the branch committee advocated for a CPI + 2.5% pay claim, the branch was instructed by the National Executive to pursue an approved option or risk a withdrawal of National Office support for bargaining, strikes, and building activities connected with any pay claim at odds with the national mandate.

Though we welcome the increase to CPI + 1.5%, we do not accept that setting a maximum limit on members ability to fight for pay increases makes sense for a national union. And we are extremely concerned that members were threatened by our own union with repercussions for setting our own pay claim. Extraordinary profits abound in Australian higher education and together with the groundswell of union power in force across many sectors, now is a perfect opportunity to demand a pay rise.

RAFA's Position

RAFA wants to shift the University of Sydney Branch's pay claim to the higher of CPI + 2.5% per annum and 15% flat. But it is clear that succeeding in this will require a change in the national position. In the interim, we are advocating taking up the CPI + 1.5% claim provisionally such that we can start pay negotiations, and work toward an increased pay claim across the country. Helping current members become more active and growing the number of new, active members are key to change at the national level.

National executive argues that a mandatory pay claim is necessary to uplift weaker branches that may not be confident to put in stronger claims. While we accept that a nationally defined minimum pay claim does encourage weaker branches to put in a stronger claim than they might otherwise, we reject that imposing a maximum claim helps our union's national negotiating position. On the contrary, we believe that every branch should be able to set their own pay claim, provided it is above the nationally defined minimum. If stronger branches can fight for a higher claim, this effectively helps increase the perceived ceiling of the

pay rise up to which weaker branches feel capable of winning. We reject that putting an upper limit on members' ability to fight for pay rises helps the union in any way. It is simply defeatism to think that the national union grows by preventing stronger branches making the most ambitious claim they think is possible.

RAFA will stay true to values of democratic decision-making, member-led action, and transparency by agitating for a review of the national decision. We aim to make the National Executive aware of the strength and will of its membership and to provide confidence that pay claims above their stated options can and should be won.

Background on RAFA's Position

Politicians, the Reserve Bank of Australia and the media are all lining up to say that workers should moderate their pay claims to reduce inflation pressure and prevent a wage-price spiral. Conservative commentators suggest workers accept a wage rise below inflation - a pay cut in real terms.

But organised workers demanding fair pay are not the cause of this economic situation. The current inflationary climate is global and is caused by a number of factors (the global pandemic, supply chain breakdown, war, oil prices). Workers have not seen a real pay rise since 2013 despite increased productivity and while those at the top grant themselves record bonuses.

At the University of Sydney, where executive salaries are exorbitant, the cost of living is higher than elsewhere in the country, and where the most recent yearly operating surplus exceeded \$1.04 billion, any claims based on economic necessity that wage growth should be below, or even match, inflation are false. Our pay is a matter of how income is divided between workers and managers — a distribution that we must desperately contest. We have casuals and low-paid staff living pay-check to pay-check.

In the context of current bargaining, our suggested pay claim of CPI + 2.5%, higher than the National Executive's maximum claim, is balanced against a package of rights and conditions in the log of claims. We are fighting for strong conversion rights for casuals, the creation of hundreds of quality academic positions, protections for professional staff facing a regular onslaught of restructure and workload intensification, safeguarding the teaching-research nexus, ending casual wage theft, improving leave, and establishing enforceable First Nations employment targets and a culturally safe workplace.

For RAFA members at the University of Sydney, it is clear that the University can afford a pay claim above inflation the National Executive's cap. Members at Sydney deserve to be able to prosecute their case and push their senior management to correct previous years of wage growth below inflation and extortionist pay rates for casuals. Furthermore, we must show solidarity with our comrades nationally by leveraging our position as one of the strongest NTEU branches. Our assertive industrial organising can keep ambitious claims in play and empower the national membership in the long term.

Next Steps for Rank and File Activism

RAFA members are writing to the National Executive to demand a new national pay claim that respects branch autonomy and member activism. Further, RAFA will be consulting with other branches to explore our options for a national plebiscite that can restore democratic, rank and file values to union processes.

At the upcoming Branch elections, RAFA is endorsing a team of activists who can work within the branch and at the state and national level to push back against non-consultative, blunt decisions like the National Executive's recent decision on pay claims. You can vote for the RAFA ticket by following the advice here <https://rafausyd.wordpress.com/how-to-vote/>.

As a rank and file community, we especially welcome your involvement. Feel free to introduce yourself to dani.cotton@sydney.edu.au and find out how you can come to a meeting to help with our campaign to grow the NTEU membership and build a strong, member-led union. We meet regularly and welcome all contributions.