



State of Enterprise Bargaining negotiations

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Pay

Staff at the university work hard and the demands on us are constantly increasing. That, along with the current inflationary environment, mean that we need – and deserve – a significant pay increase. NTEU members voted in November to argue for a pay increase that is 1.5 per cent above CPI. We have now officially lodged this claim with management, and expect it to be negotiated in the new year. Significant campaigning, including industrial action, will be necessary to win this claim.

Conditions affecting all ongoing staff

We have secured some valuable improvements in leave rights (parental leave; introduction of gender transition and affirmation leave; increased leave for disasters; extensions to personal leave to cover menstrual and menopausal needs, which will not require documentation). In contrast, management are completely refusing our proposals for serious improvements to the change-management system, a major tool for redundancies at the university. We have made numerous compromises on our proposals for how to fix this broken system, but we're still being met with a brick wall.

On job-security, the NTEU entered negotiations with a proposal for no forced redundancies. This might seem too good to be true, but empirical analysis of redundancies shows that it would be entirely feasible – if only management were prepared to abandon its determination to manage the university by sacking staff. Management have rejected this claim entirely. We have indicated that we are willing to explore other options to provide further job security, but management has rejected these, and has so far refused to even propose alternatives to improve job-security. We are still waiting to hear from them about what they are prepared to do to bring our redundancy provisions up to the standard found at other institutions.

Professional staff conditions

Professional staff issues have occupied a large proportion of bargaining time this year. We have achieved one of our major campaign goals by obtaining management's agreement to major improvements in flexible work and work-from-home provisions. These will substantially boost professional staff entitlements in these areas. Another important achievement is that management have agreed to a new mechanism for the regulation of professional staff workload — a central professional staff workload-monitoring committee, the first of its kind at our university, allowing staff an independent review of excessive workloads. We have also secured improvements to the Professional Staff Development fund, in order to increase access for staff at lower HEO levels.

We have had some success in preventing management's desire to abolish the priority internal advertising of professional staff vacancies. Management's opening position was to abolish internal priority advertising entirely. Thanks to our pressure, they have now agreed to retain it for HEO levels 1-7. After consultation with NTEU members, the union bargaining team has told management that internal advertising should be retained at least up to HEO8.

Academic staff conditions

Management initially wanted to abolish the faculty workload committees established under the last agreement (the so-called 'collegial' committees), thereby removing any possibility of democratic staff input into the definition and regulation of workload. We have successfully wound back much of this attack and are currently negotiating over the details of the workload committees, particularly the crucial question of the chair and appeals (management wanting the Provost to be the ultimate decision maker, the NTEU seeking a consensus approach). Management have also agreed to the establishment of indicative workload standards.

The research-teaching nexus is an essential feature of a university. Safeguarding this, and limiting the expansion of education-focused (EF) roles, have been major objectives in this bargaining round. The NTEU has now agreed to include significant increases in the number of education-focused staff the agreement allows. But, to ensure that we preserve the teaching-research nexus, we cannot accept an unreasonable increase in these roles. Shockingly, management want to have the right to massively increase the number of education-focused roles. This proposal constitutes a very significant threat to the composition of the academic workforce and to equity in the institution. With their unsustainable seventy percent education allocation, education-focused roles will break the link between teaching and research even further, degrade the quality of teaching at the university (not, as management claim, improve it) and swamp balanced teaching and research roles within the overall academic workforce. The NTEU will simply not consent to academics' capacity to conduct research being significantly reduced, or teaching workload being significantly increased.

Management also entered negotiations wanting to completely abolish academics' right to a forty percent research allocation in their workload ('40:40:20'), and to force academics to negotiate their teaching and research workloads annually with their supervisor. This is the most serious attack on staff rights at the university since the balanced workload allocation was established. Doing away with the 40:40:20 workload allocation would remove the collective standard governing academic work and force staff into individual workload negotiations. It would enable management to reduce academics' research allocation unilaterally. The NTEU will never agree to the abolition of 40:40:20 or to individualized negotiations to determine workload.

Casual underpayment

We are also seeking to ensure fair pay for all casual staff in the future. With casual underpayment claims being made all over the University, and management needing to pay backpay to casuals in sums that often total in the millions, it is time to make the Agreement clear regarding casual payment. The NTEU first proposed this at the start of discussions in 2021. We then discussed it in detail earlier this year, and served a draft clause on management several months ago, making it clear that we were prepared to negotiate on all aspects of this clause. Despite this considerable time and process, management is still not in a position to respond to the NTEU claim and have indicated they will do so next year. This is a key NTEU claim. We have made it clear that it is critical to finalise it before any Agreement can be reached – yet management is still not in a position to provide the NTEU with a response. It is not the NTEU who is showing intransigence and delaying finalisation of an agreement.

Issues affecting academic casuals

Ending the scourge of exploitative casual employment is a major priority which we will continue to pursue assertively. Management have agreed to the creation of PhD fellowships to address job-insecurity among postgraduate students who do teaching work. In addition, they have also now agreed to reduce the size of the long-term casual workforce. One mechanism that will contribute to this goal is the creation of 300 new academic jobs. Of these 300 positions, 200 will be education-focused, and 100 will be teaching and research positions at the standard 40:40:20 allocation (itself under threat, see above). Due to the numbers of casuals currently employed, we are insisting that 300 new positions is not yet enough to turn the tide on the university's reliance on casuals; that the new jobs must genuinely replace casual work; that long-term casuals must have a clear and equitable pathway into ongoing teaching and research roles so that their years of service to the university do not deprive them of any chance of a teaching and research career; and that there must be adequate workload controls on the EF roles (see above). Management have now agreed that fifty of the 100 new 40:40:20 positions will be earmarked for long-term casual academics. They are also open to reserving up to 50 Education Focused roles for long-run USyd Casuals. The NTEU believes casuals should have access to more.

As well as decasualisation, we are arguing for sick pay for casuals, and for an end to systemic wage-theft. Success on these claims will require more campaigning. The NTEU is steadfast in its support of a just outcome for casuals. It is unacceptable that management are not fully committed to eradicating systemic wage-theft.

Issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff

Management entered the negotiations with no proposals whatsoever to improve the situation for First Nations staff at the university. All the initiative in this area has come from the NTEU. We have convinced management to make some changes to conditions for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues, with the introduction of a dedicated consultative forum and a recognition of cultural load. On the crucial issue of employment targets, management had previously signalled their willingness to adopt a 30 per cent annual increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment. The NTEU saw this as good progress, though we did not fully agree to a clause as management refused to make either this annual 30% increase, or an overall target, enforceable in the agreement, despite our willingness to build in mechanisms that would make this easier for them.

Had the 30 percent target been enforced, it would have brought First Nations employment close to population parity by 2026. Astonishingly, in the last bargaining meeting of the year management adopted a lower target, of just 22 additional Indigenous staff per year – which they also are refusing to make strictly enforceable. If this target was included, it would postpone attaining population parity until 2030. This is a completely unacceptable degradation in management’s commitment to Indigenous justice. Greater Sydney has the largest First Nations population in Australia; there is no excuse for an institution as wealthy as us not to commit to ambitious First Nations employment targets.