



## **Our historic struggle has set a new benchmark for the sector, but fallen short of breaking the Scott/Jagose agenda**

24 April, 2023

Rank and File Action (RAFA) are a collective of union activists within the NTEU USyd Branch. We have built rank and file support for ambitious, member-led and militant unionism throughout the 22-month enterprise bargaining campaign via regular bulletins, workplace meetings, forums, information sessions, fliers, posters, stalls, petitions and phone conversations with colleagues. We also organised small rallies and disruptions to support strike action.

We wanted to continue the fight against overwork and to defend the research-teaching nexus through more controls over Education Focussed Roles (EFRs), to achieve a real pay rise, and to fight for Aboriginal employment parity. That's why at the April 18th members' meeting, RAFA members moved, seconded and argued strongly for our motion of a 72-hour strike in Week 10. The motion was defeated 364 votes to 290. We are disappointed we were unable to convince the branch to once more escalate our struggle for better pay and working conditions. However, we are proud that RAFA have taken the lead throughout the campaign in opposing the exploitative vision of the university promoted by the Provost and the Vice-Chancellor.

The USyd NTEU branch made history with nine days of industrial action: 14% growth in membership and unprecedented participation in the democratic life of the branch, with over 700 members participating in the two most recent meetings. The 290 members who voted in favour of the three-day strike showed there is a substantial minority willing to fight in the face of massive pressure from

Management, and fallacious scare-campaigning from Thrive-aligned members and the NTEU general secretary, Damien Cahill. We will need to further strengthen this rank and file base for the struggles ahead.

Our branch has resisted the 'rapid settlement strategy' advocated in the meeting by Cahill. As a result of charting an alternative course we forced management to revise its pay offer upwards for the first time in any recent bargaining campaign, forced them to commit to introducing a policy of sick pay for casuals—unheard of in any Australian university—won significant new leave provisions, and secured a significant extension of job-security provisions and flexible work rights for professional staff. We also took important steps forward in decasualisation: 330 additional new jobs and a commitment to limit casuals to 20% of the academic workforce—a proportion that is still too high, but which nevertheless represents valuable progress. Finally, we have secured far stronger measures to promote First Nations employment than would otherwise have been possible. None of this would have been extracted from Management without a consistently militant strategy of industrial confrontation, embodied in an ambitious but realistic programme of strike action.

The agreement that members have conditionally accepted falls short in many significant ways, which must not be glossed over. But the conditions we did succeed in winning set a high-water mark that will assist

NTEU members on other campuses in their EBA struggles. Shamefully, however, the NTEU NSW and national offices did not mobilise significantly or allocate sufficient resources to support our sector-leading struggle. Mobilisation for the NTEU National Week of Action also appears to have been delayed until after the vote to escalate at USyd was lost. Damien Cahill used his privilege as national general secretary to throw his weight behind the campaign to capitulate by arguing that continuing our struggle represented a risk to the strength of our branch. We vigorously reject this.

[As we argued in detail in our bulletin](#) and at the April 18 meeting itself, the threats of a non-union ballot and of the new intractable bargaining legislation did not justify calling off the strikes at this point. These threats were intended to intimidate members into accepting the capitulation advocated by the national office and supported by Thrive members locally.

The 'rapid settlement strategy' advanced nationally has hamstrung the branch in this round of bargaining. This 'strategy' aims for settlement at the earliest opportunity, with token strike action followed by concessions in bargaining because of a lack of faith in the potential of member-driven militancy. Instead of fighting together, the officials argued first to settle at UWS and UTS while we were still taking strike action. Then they pressured us to settle while UNSW, Macquarie, Newcastle and most campuses nationally are still bargaining. Combined union action across NSW campuses could have meant every campus

winning better outcomes.

While we have significantly improved some aspects of pay and conditions through our epic two-year campaign, it remains a deep injustice that a University that registered a one-billion-dollar operating surplus in 2021 is pushing its workers' pay backwards by 4.6% in real terms across the new agreement. While we saw off an attack on 40/40/20 for ongoing academics, we remain extremely concerned about the expansion of Education Focused Roles (EFRs) and the extent of exploitation and overwork embodied in these roles. We continue to reject the creation of a two-tier academic workforce and will fight to resist this process by organising EFR staff and campaigning around this issue through the life of the new agreement. We do not believe that any union should have prematurely accepted the entrenching of overwork in the way we were encouraged to by national and division officials. We recognise that under Australia's draconian anti-worker industrial laws we can only exercise the legal right to strike every three years. As well as organising against these bad laws, we will use every avenue available to us to defend academics, casuals, professional staff and all workers at USyd during the term of this agreement.

Rank and File Action is open to any NTEU member who wants to join us in this fight to enforce what we have won under the new agreement, support social justice unionism and the struggles that are ongoing on other university campuses.

#### **Public Forum:**

Please come along to our next public event, an online forum entitled **'Building a fighting union: Lessons from USyd'** on Friday 5 May at 12pm.

#### **Stay in Touch:**

*Stay in touch with RAFA via our contact page [here](#), read previous bulletins [here](#) and if you haven't already, join the NTEU [here](#).*