

VU FIGHTBACK

Bulletin for NTEU members' meeting, Thur 10 Sept 2020

What's in VU's Enterprise Agreement Variation (EAV) proposal?

- Everyone will lose a week's worth of wages per year until the end of 2022, through a compulsory Special Additional Leave purchase scheme. Equates to a 2% across-the-board pay cut.
- All staff will be forced to take up to 10 days of purchased leave/annual leave/LSL in "close down periods" around Xmas and Easter.
- If you get reclassified, promoted or move up an increment in your salary band before 1 September 2022, you won't receive the pay rise associated with it, nor will you get backpaid what you missed out on. Increment progression is approximately 3% per year. (You can get superannuation at the higher level, which might be important for those who have chosen the Defined Benefit option – but *you have to make the correspondingly higher contributions*. Someone could potentially be working at a higher level and paying out a big chunk to super, thus actually receiving less in their pay packet, for well over a year!)
- Leave loading will be abolished for the next three years, representing a cut to pay of another 70% of a week's wages each year (or a 1.3% additional annual wage cut).
- Scheduled pay rises due on 1 Sept each year would be only 1%

instead of the 2.25% in our EA.

This is a cut of another week's pay per year. We would supposedly be paid the 2.5% pay rise owing in September 2023 – a full year after our current EA expires. This could prejudice any new negotiations for improvements in pay in a new EBA – in effect prolonging the effects of EVA into the next EBA. (And note that even after taking into account the original scheduled pay rises, VU staff would still be some of the lowest paid university workers in the country, so this measure would leave us lagging a very long way behind.)

- Management will be able to force staff to take all annual leave down to a 10 day balance, and force us to take long service leave with no minimum balance specified, with only 12 weeks' notice.
- Allows management to change our duties, directing any staff member to perform any duty/teach any course within our ability.

The protections for jobs given by management in return are largely unenforceable. For instance:

- Work will continue for casuals "wherever possible".
- Work will return to casuals and fixed term staff "as far as administratively possible".
- Management will facilitate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and other employees in high risk groups to work from

home for longer periods “wherever possible”.

- No extra guarantees around forced redundancy compared with our existing EA, which states: “*Prior to the use of any forced redundancies the University will first pursue the options of voluntary separation packages and direct transfer*” and also requires the University to “*fully explore*” other options such as redeployment, voluntary conversion to part-time and secondment.

The proposed attacks on our wages are lazy, regressive, flat rate measures that will disadvantage lower-paid staff the most.

Will an EA variation save jobs?

The EAV will no doubt save money for management. Whether this money goes to saving jobs is another question. There are no guarantees in the proposed EA Variation against forced redundancies, and we only have the University’s word that all these sacrifices will in fact save 90 jobs.

EAVs which cut wages at La Trobe and Monash have not stopped hundreds of redundancies. Hundreds of staff accepting shorter hours at UNSW have not stopped massive job cuts there.

We are meant to get some protection from the fact that management share financial information with an “Expert Assessment Panel” which signs off on the wage cuts.

However the EAP is dominated by neoliberal university administrators. The VC shared the interim report from this body in his email on 8 Sept. There is no transparency in this document about the parts of the University that have been affected by COVID – just a restatement of the University’s claims to a drop in revenue.

Is the University coming to us in good faith?

Our existing EA allows the University to propose major change for pretty much any reason. So why don’t they go through this process?

Why are they in such a hurry to attack staff? The VC’s email on 8 Sept stated that they want this EAV agreed to by the end of this month. But VU is a public institution, in the midst of a pandemic, and bank interest rates are effectively zero – if protecting staff conditions is important to them, why don’t they seek to tide over the COVID emergency with a loan? *Why are staff wages and conditions their first line of attack?*

The VC’s email to staff on 8 Sept describes the EAV proposals as “sharing the burden of COVID equally”. What an outrage.

Where is the acknowledgement that staff have already contributed a huge amount to the University’s bottom line, through more than six months of working from home, saving the University millions while staff have borne the costs individually?

What about the abolition of RDOs without any consultation with staff?

What about the incredible way that staff have risen to the challenge of putting all courses and services online, often without any casual or sessional staff support?

What about the enormous job losses (and consequent revenue savings) that have already been suffered by casual and sessional staff, the non-renewal of fixed-term contracts and the non-filling of vacancies?

The figure of “190 jobs” is also unreliable. Senior management negotiators stated at the last VC Strategic Conversation that the University could not easily operate if it lost 190 people in the next 12-18 months. What is sure is that the University plans to

cut 60 FTE staff this year, and 40 next year, no matter what.

However, [this study](#) co-written by former VU senior manager Teresa Tjia shows clearly that the constant sickening restructures and sackings at universities never actually reduce staff numbers – they just result in people being re-employed on worse conditions. This is a familiar story at VU – everyone’s got a story about how their team was merged or restructured and great people made ‘redundant’ – but the work is all still there, but now being carried by fewer and more junior staff.

The myth of voluntary redundancies

No one wants to stand in the way of their colleagues getting a package, but what happens to staff left behind when they take a voluntary redundancy but their workload remains?

The University is under no obligation to give a package to everyone who wants one – so forced redundancies are still likely, even if we agree to an EA variation. (This is the case under the EA too – albeit with much stronger protections for staff affected.)

VU already operates on a lean, restricted budget and has gone through multiple restructures in recent years. Overwork and burnout are everywhere and have only been made worse under COVID. So where are all these staff whose work is *genuinely* redundant? Or this proposal actually a massive intensification of work masquerading as a financial crisis?

What happens if we Vote NO to negotiating with the University on this EAV?

Some NTEU members and officials are arguing that if we don’t negotiate with the University on this proposal, we are shutting the door on negotiations and saying “bring on 190 job cuts”.

But saying this accepts the University’s logic and its figures. It’s possible that negotiating on this EAV might result in a guarantee of no forced redundancies for a period of time. Alternatively, it might still lead to the same number of job cuts, but with conditions lost. Is that worth the enormous sacrifices that staff left behind would be asked to make?

It’s possible that University may seek to vary the Enterprise Agreement via an all-staff ballot, without the agreement of the union.

If we vote No to negotiations based on their current proposal, they would have to pursue any proposed restructures or redundancies within the terms of the VU Enterprise Agreement (clauses 64, 66, 67 and 68) and consult with the NTEU about any major change proposals.

The University could also ‘go back to the drawing board’ and come up with an alternative EA variation, or another financial plan that doesn’t lean so heavily on taking money out of our pockets.

To join the VU Fightback mailing list, email noconcessions.fight@gmail.com

Read about how NTEU branches around the country have faced similar challenges at <https://nteufightback.site/>