

How can we get "strike ready"?

This was first published in our regular No Concessions email update on 25 August. For more discussion of this general theme, see also our documents [Fighting back against job cuts](#) and an [Where to from here? An updated six point plan](#), available on the [resources page](#) of our website.

Around the sector, plenty of people are talking about strikes.

Yesterday's assembly of more than 450 university workers, convened by the National Higher Education Action Network (NHEAN), passed a [motion](#) which condemned the Federal Government and committed to:

Mounting a vigorous campaign of coordinated actions with the goal of making democratically planned unprotected industrial action possible so as to defend universities from funding cuts and protect all university jobs.

On August 15, a one day conference organised by the Casual, Unemployed and Precarious University Workers (CUPUW) network also focused at length on strikes. We heard a report from the recent wildcat strike of hundreds of graduate student teachers at University of California Santa Cruz, which won a 12% pay rise and fought off victimisation. There was also a session on the organising required to make our workplaces "strike ready".

And of course, the leadership of the NTEU has been getting in on the act as well. At a forum on wage theft last Friday, Vic Division Secretary Mel Slee mentioned in passing that the bargaining round next year would feature "a national strike over insecure work". This follows on from Alison Barnes' declaration, on the day the national leadership's wage-cutting National "Jobs Protection" Framework imploded amidst an unprecedented rank and file revolt, that the "NTEU will now escalate to what will be historically high levels of industrial disputation and campaigning to fight for every job."

So what are we to make of all this?

Strikes are crucial. By and large university managements regard uni workers and their union as push-overs. Managements have been able to casualise much of the workforce, increase workloads and erode conditions for decades because we have hardly exercised the power we have.

Our work is what makes universities function. Our work is the teaching and research, and the practical services that make them possible, which is why universities exist. And our work creates the profits that have funded obscene pay packets for the neoliberal managers in charge of universities. Their job descriptions are to suck as much work out of us as possible.

So sweet reason and sophisticated intellectual arguments are not going to persuade university executives to be nice to us. But if we stop working, so that 'their' universities don't function, they have

to pay attention. Particularly in hard times, that's the only way to effectively defend ourselves, let alone improve pay, conditions and job security.

To make a start at ending the decades-long model of increasingly casualised university employment, and to reset the debate on public funding of public education, we need the sort of extensive, mass-participation industrial action that we've seen from teachers unions in the United States in recent years.

It will come as no surprise to anyone reading this bulletin, that we can say with absolute certainty that the newfound rhetorical commitment to strikes by the NTEU leadership is completely hollow. The leadership of our union has demonstrated in practice, over many years, that they have zero capacity or interest in pushing towards this sort of strike action. In fact, they have spent years heading off promising industrial campaigns at the stronger campuses (most notably Sydney Uni) and imposing disastrous settlements on poorer campuses where the union is weaker (Murdoch, University of New England and Victoria University spring to mind).

Rather than building industrial strength, their response to the crisis has been to design a nation-wide wage cutting scheme and hawk it around university bosses – the National “Jobs Protection” Framework. Their Framework has imploded but their strategy remains unchanged: just last week, the NTEU leadership helped push through an 11 to 14% wage cut for workers at Adelaide Uni.

The Framework and its descendents have been promoted as a way to save jobs. On this front, however, actions speak much louder than words. Despite various statements from NTEU officials that voluntary redundancies can and should be disputed on workload grounds, all the information we have is that the NTEU office is actually steadfastly refusing to do this.

Raising Expectations and Raising Hell is the title of famous organiser Jane McAlevey's book on building for serious, mass participation industrial action which can win life-changing gains for the workers involved and for society as a whole. Our current leadership has a 100% consistent track record of opposing and undermining the possibility of that kind of action.

In other words: one of the main obstacles to serious industrial action will be the current leadership of our union.

However, having copped a serious backlash over their appalling conduct, our union's leadership do have an interest in putting on something of a left, more militant face. Hence Alison Barnes' verbal attachment to disputes and disputation, while doing the exact opposite; hence Mel Slee's hypothetical “national strike on job security”.

This poses an important strategic problem for militants in the NTEU – whether in Fightback, CUPUW, or NHEAN. The motion circulated by NHEAN, for all its strengths in pointing to industrial action, simply dodges this issue of how to regard the leadership of the NTEU and its pronouncements. It is not only the federal government but also vice chancellors and our union's own officials who are attacking us. This omission is the main reason why we decided not to endorse the Assembly.

We also thought the motion's silence on the vice chancellors was a problem. Vice chancellors are key enemies, not our allies in any sense. Few have been able to raise even a murmur of discontent with Dan Tehan's next level neoliberal restructuring plans: and despite any such murmurings, they are carrying out this restructuring with vigour.

The reason for stating this clearly and stridently is that one of the standard plays of a concessionary union leadership is to portray these millionaire neoliberal executives as our potential allies. They aren't – and to treat them as other than our enemies is simply disarming. It also distracts attention away from the immediate task of mounting serious resistance to their attacks.

Even as we speak, our national and divisional officials are organising with vice chancellors to impose concessions, and waving through job cuts. Not even mentioning this fact, or these players, in the motion is a glaring omission in our view. The danger is that the officials' left talk is allowed to be a cover for their actual and consistent, concessionary practice. Not drawing a clear public line on this question in the current circumstances intensifies this danger, of helping the officials to disguise their actual practice with left-sounding public relations spin.

Along with the attitude to the VCs and the union's officials, the other key strategic question is: how do we go from where we are – several hundred militants and activists spread across the university sector – to where we want to be – organising and carrying out the sort of mass industrial action which can transform the sector? It's an achievement for 335 university workers to vote for unprotected industrial action – but obviously it's several orders of magnitude removed from *actually* carrying strikes out.

Here we think it's important to draw on history. Almost any wildcat action has a precedent in either official strikes, long term workplace organisation, or both. The unofficial [strike](#) at Goldsmiths College in London in the middle of this year, for instance, was no doubt assisted by the fact that there had been two weeks of official strikes [this year](#), two weeks [last year](#), and a massive sector-wide round of industrial action in [2018](#).

We don't know so much about the background to the University of California Santa Cruz [wildcat](#), but we're pretty sure the two-decade history of organising at UC by members of [UAW 2865](#), the 2014 [strikes](#), and the massive debate over the highly contentious 2018 [contract](#) all contributed the foundation on which the 2019-20 wildcat strike was built.

The mass teacher strikes that swept a dozen US states and cities in [2018](#) and [2019](#), was a mixture of well-planned official strikes (Chicago, Los Angeles and Oakland), and wildcats that seemed to come from nowhere (West Virginia, Arizona, Kentucky) – but all of them looked to the experience of the mass strike by the Chicago Teachers Union, meticulously planned and carried out in 2012, which showed educators nationwide that it was possible to draw the line against neoliberal austerity.

On a much smaller scale, the successful campaign against job cuts at USyd in 2012 directly fed into the enterprise agreement campaign of 2012-13, which included an unprecedented seven days of industrial action.

So, what do we pull out of all this history?

We believe our best bet for building the sort of industrial action we need is by making next year's bargaining round our key medium term priority, as we organise against today's attacks on jobs and conditions. If we want to take advantage of next year's window for legally protected industrial action, we need to be focused on it as we organise resistance to the attacks coming through now.

For instance, we need to be formulating demands for a log of claims and mandatory settlement points which can end the disgrace of 70% of teaching being done by casual workers. Casualised warehouse workers have achieved this by winning ratios and hard conversion clauses through strike action - we should be pushing for the same in higher ed. And we need to be using the struggles of today to systematically build the industrial strength we need to achieve this.

Concretely, this week, what's required is: building the most vigorous and systematic organising effort against job cuts, EA concessions, and underpayments. Even if we don't win every round, such campaigns can cohere groups of activists which are essential for future campaigns. This has certainly been our experience of pushing hard on a No Concessions platform on many campuses. We wrote last week about the organising that led to the successful underpayments claim at Melbourne Uni - this sort of old school, face to face organising is fundamental.

Frankly, we don't think that this will be aided by the sort of National Day of Action we saw in May, where our national officials took a brief break from shoving concessions down our throats in order to make a left wing speech or two to tiny crowds, before getting back to the hard work of selling us out. It remains to be seen what the character of the potential mobilisation in October mentioned in NHEAN's motion will be. Obviously there *should* be major demonstrations against the outrageous attacks on higher education. But given that our union leadership are party to these attacks, we won't hold our breath waiting for them to seriously mobilise. Instead, we'll be focused squarely on workplace organising, opposing the concrete attacks happening on each campus.

We also doubt that simply signing people up to a national program of industrial action is going to get the results desired, without the sort of preparation work (including local organising, and official disputes) that we outline above. Any industrial action, to be effective, will need to be more than a decent smattering of the something like 200,000 workers in higher ed in this country. It will need majority support in areas of real industrial power. This will only come from systematic building through local disputes.

These are serious questions, so we make no apologies for putting our differences on strategy in a pretty straightforward way. Obviously it's very positive that a widespread debate on industrial action, and how to achieve it, has emerged out of the mass rank and file revolt that destroyed the officials' wage-cutting Framework. We're looking forward to continuing these discussions over the days and months to come as we continue our efforts to organise on campus (virtual or otherwise!).