

Vote NO and then what?

A [draft] six point plan to turn things around

1. Vote No to the National Framework

If we can't have a red hot go at vigorously defending our existing, legally protected, enterprise agreement conditions, it's going to be very tough indeed to defend much else. Getting a strong Vote No result nationally, even on campuses which have declared they are out of the National Framework, is a vital step in rejecting concessions generally.

Crucially, organising for Vote No is a concrete organising project. It involves mapping our workplaces, holding workplace meetings, working out connections into areas with little strength, and above all, a systematic program of personal discussion and engagement with our fellow workers: the absolute fundamentals of pretty much any successful workplace organising drive in history.

To the extent we can carry out these workplace organising tasks this will give us experience, and a platform of organisation, which will be crucial in the struggles to come – whether or not the national leadership's campaign of spin, fear, and antidemocratic maneuvers get them over the line in their national ballot.

2. Vote No to any local EA variation

By publicly and stridently pushing for concessions, the national leadership of the NTEU have sent a signal of weakness to Vice Chancellors across the country. Now, VCs – starting with Melbourne Uni but no doubt spreading – are going to try their own more or less severe variations.

We think it is crucial to organise against all of these concessions. Each concession given, even if its "minor" compared with the brutal wage cuts in the National Framework, will encourage VCs to push for further concessions. And importantly, we will not build union strength, as outlined in point one above, by just agreeing to sacrifice our wages and conditions.

3. A vigorous, systematic local contest on jobs and workloads

Organising to make an impact in a national ballot, or a university wide ballot, isn't easy. Organising against job cuts, restructures, and excessive workloads is more difficult again – because our EA clauses in these areas usually don't give us hard, enforceable rights.

Nevertheless, these battles are essential because they can impact on management and (crucially) will build union strength.

At our [livestream](#) last week, [Alma Liam](#) and [Katie](#) all mentioned examples of the fights, large and small, we've been involved in at a local level. Some have lost, some have won, all have been worth having – and all of them built the union. We need hundreds of these disputes across higher education, and we need to join them up.

4. Encourage, resource and connect these local battles

Each local fight is a lot of detailed organising work. It should be the role of the Branch, Divisional and National structures of the union to resource these fights with skills and material, to link up activists involved in them, and to magnify these struggles so they have a political impact both at a university level and beyond.

Unfortunately, our national and state level officials seem too preoccupied with using a wage-cutting scheme to get a seat at the negotiating table, rather than fostering this sort of concrete organising activity. This needs to be turned around.

5. Use these battles to build industrial strength towards the next bargaining round -- and use that power to demand substantial, life-changing improvements in conditions and a new deal for public education.

Perhaps it is easiest to explain this one by example.

If you want an example of a union which hadn't had a serious fight in decades, with a leadership which could see no option but to sell off conditions to ensure a place at the table, and a disengaged and discontented membership, try the Chicago Teachers Union of a decade ago.

Yet in 2012, after several years of consistent rank and file organising, the union's 26,000 members shut down every school in the city in an electrifying, well-organised and effective nine day [strike](#). The strike shook the whole city up and scored an important defensive win on conditions.

The strike didn't solve all of the problems facing public education in the US, or in Chicago, but it did break the pattern of defeat and retreat. It changed the discussion on public education and its funding, in the city of Chicago and beyond. Even more important, the strike became an inspiration for educators in other parts of the country, who applied the model of organising

(centred around detailed workplace organising, and building and connecting local disputes) and eventually [triggered](#) the incredible wave of teacher strikes in the US in [2018](#) and [2019](#).

We can learn from this example that consistent organising, aimed at building industrial power, and then using the strike weapon, can turn around a whole awful history of defeat and retreat. We think it should be possible to adapt that model and work to a similar plan in our own circumstances.

6. Elections

Unions have always been rebuilt from the bottom up – not by parachuting a couple of individuals, or even a whole team, into official positions. Getting into office has never been what has motivated us as union activists or people.

On the other hand, giving a good shakeup to the incumbents who have advocated for the terrible attacks in the National Framework is a worthwhile aim. Having a few officials who might facilitate union democracy rather than crush it, and committing to organise and fight in response to a crisis, rather than bargain away wages and conditions, would be a step forward.

At any rate, any electoral challenge has to be a means – like all the other steps outlined above – to an end. That end being: rebuilding workers strength where it matters the most – in the workplace.

So, to go back to the start. There is nothing “easy” about any plan to turn things around, especially in the crisis conditions we’re in. We know there are plenty of knocks to come.

Each of the steps above require a lot of organising.

The positive is, that’s exactly what a large and growing number of Vote No people across the country are already doing – getting active and organised to talk to our workmates. And each of these steps is entirely possible – if the enormous energy generated by Vote No can be continued and harnessed.

We believe any realistic plan to confront the crisis has to start with what we’re doing – using every possible hour of the day to organise our way across our universities, and across the whole sector, to maximise the Vote No turnout – and in doing so, develop workers’ organising and industrial power for the many battles to come.