

We deserve CPI plus 2.5% – why settle for less?

An NTEU Fightback document – 5 July 2022

It's a mark of progress that the NTEU National Executive has now adopted its third national salary claim within the space of three months. But there's still more to fight for.

NTEU Fightback launched agitation for an inflation-adjusted union pay claim in March. In April, the union's National Executive [raised](#) the claim from 12% (by the end of 2024) to 15%.* Last week the NE increased the claim again to include a component linked to the [Consumer Price Index](#), the standard measure of inflation in Australia. So the main national claim is now 15% or "CPI plus 1.5%", whichever is higher.

We think it's worth pushing for a higher claim still. A claim for "15% or CPI plus 2.5%" has been approved already by branch committees at RMIT, Melbourne Uni and [USyd](#) – with members' meetings to follow.

A well-attended ANU members meeting at ANU voted up a claim of CPI plus 2.5% a couple of weeks ago. This wasn't communicated to members though – and now the National Executive and BC have reduced the claim to CPI plus 1.5% without further consultation.

In response, Fightback supporters at ANU have launched an [open letter about the pay claim](#) and how it's being handled, stating: "There are many very welcome demands in our ANU NTEU log of claims. But the wage claim is inadequate." So please sign the open letter if you're at ANU, and forward [this link](#) to any colleagues there.

Here's ten points about the higher claim (15% or CPI plus 2.5%):

1. An extra 1% matters: A HEW 4.5 admin worker at RMIT is currently on \$71,634 per year. So an extra 1% pay rise adds up to more than \$2,000 over the life of the agreement.

This worker got a pay rise of 2% in June 2021, and another 2% announced by management in May this year. In the meantime, petrol has surged past \$2 per litre and fresh food is off the charts, fuelling a "non discretionary" inflation rate of 6.6%. Winning an extra 2.5% on top of inflation would be just the start of redressing this or even workers improving our living standards – which should be the bedrock of what unions are about.

2. Why provide an option for a lower pay claim, but not a higher pay claim? At branches which haven't started bargaining, the NE's motion from last week says the claim will be 15% by the end of 2024, or CPI plus 1.5% per year, whichever is higher.

But for the majority of union branches which have already started bargaining, there is an option for a lower claim. Instead of going with the "15% or CPI plus 1.5%" claim, branches can decide to stick with the previous (less ambitious) claim of 15% flat by the end of 2024.

So, why allow a supposedly mandatory claim to be lowered, but not raised? At the very least, there should be an option for branches to fight for CPI plus 2.5%.

3. Solidarity: The NE apparently debated a pay claim of CPI plus 2.5%, but decided on CPI plus 1.5% because office holders from some branches doubted their ability to win the higher claim. We're now hearing around the place that sticking to this lower pay claim nationally is all about "solidarity" with not-so-strong branches.

But that's not how solidarity works. In fact, the opposite.

If strong union branches fight and win, this has the potential to inspire the less strong to fight and win as well. That's how it worked in the [1980s](#), and it's how it can work now. To use an example from Britain: it's obvious to both the [government](#) and [the left](#) that if the RMT rail union wins their pay claim, plenty of other workers will be inspired to push for higher wages.

Similarly, if stronger NTEU branches win a bigger pay rise, this would set a good precedent for other branches. By way of contrast, the dismal pay outcome at [Sydney](#) in the last EA flowed through in the form of sub-2%, below-inflation [deals](#) at less strong branches such as [Murdoch](#), on the other side of the country.

Stronger branches fighting for higher pay results, and winning, is good for every worker in the sector. That's what solidarity is.

4. A higher pay claim heads off management bribes: The notoriously anti-union management of Qantas recently took advantage of cost of living pressures, offering a [\\$5,000 bribe](#) to workers to encourage a vote for management's [appalling offer](#) on a new enterprise agreement. It seems that management at UTas have the same thing in mind, offering a 4.6% pay rise as a way to look good and [bypass the union](#).

A union wage claim which is a healthy margin above inflation will help us to head off this threat.

5. Union members are prepared to fight for it: There are plenty of workers angry over the obscene surpluses reported by management across the sector, accumulated on the back of mass sackings and attempted or actual wage freezes. Even before the RMIT branch committee voted for CPI plus 2.5%, members were already contacting the branch to demand a similar wage rise. Fightback doesn't have a lot of well-established activists at ANU, but when the question was put to a members meeting, there was majority support for CPI plus 2.5%.

This gives us some confidence that if branch leaderships and activists give a lead, a higher wage claim can help to raise expectations, increase recruitment, win support for the log of claims as a whole and inspire the strike action that will be necessary to win them.

6. The highest form of union democracy is ordinary members collectively asserting themselves to defend and advance workers' interests. With pretty much zero consultation with members, the National Executive has settled on a less ambitious pay rise than the figure already endorsed by several branch committees and the ANU members meeting. We don't think that this should be the end of the argument.

In 2020, if ordinary union members had simply rolled over and accepted that the union's national leadership had all the say-so, a 15% wage cut would have been imposed across many universities. This terrible example could have flowed well beyond the university sector.

7. Management across much of the sector is [rolling in cash](#), with [USyd's \\$1 billion surplus](#) grabbing the most headlines. And regardless of how much cash is sloshing around, workers shouldn't be making even more sacrifices to cover up for years of government underfunding and neoliberal "reform".

Fighting for a decent pay rise is an essential part of fighting for a properly funded public education system. Australia's billionaires are [reported](#) to have doubled their wealth in the past couple of years – so there's no particular reason for us to scrimp, save and sacrifice.

8. Ambition on pay is part of a package. We've been arguing for a couple of years that this bargaining round should be all about making ambitious claims which can actually address the chronic problems facing workers in higher education.

- A clause requiring that vacant positions are quickly filled can help solve workload issues. So can workload committees with teeth, and preserving and strengthening the research fraction for academic staff (eg 40:40:20 at USyd, strengthening 30% research fraction clause at RMIT, etc)
- A strong clause to impose "site rates" on outsourcing is an important job security measure: winning a clause for no forced redundancies is another.
- A raft of measures to address casualisation – including conversion, ratios, and forcing up the price of casual labour through payment for all hours worked – are all worth fighting for.
- A clause prescribing the minimum number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff who "will" be employed (not just a vague and unenforceable "target") can start to address the chronic underemployment of First Nations people across the sector.

We've written plenty about these clauses (and many more) in our detailed, clickable resource ["clauses worth fighting for"](#), available on our newly renovated resources page on the [NTEU Fightback website](#). An ambitious log of claims is crucial to any serious fight – and a pay rise well ahead of inflation is now a crucial part of that package.

9. Don't settle for less: Making ambitious claims for pay and conditions worth fighting for is one thing – then we have to organise and fight for them. Crucially, we need to be able to vote down any proposed settlement that leaves major demands not won.

10. Vote for the team that organises and fights – Vote Fightback! Unions are transformed from the bottom up, not the top down. So our emphasis has always been on organising and activism among members and the wider workforce. But who occupies branch, division and national positions matters: in August 2022 you can vote for Fightback candidates at a bunch of universities.

Fightback election material is [available on our website](#) – please contact us to find out how you can support our campaigns at Sydney Uni, UQ, QUT, Melbourne Uni and RMIT!!

*The original wage claim endorsed by National Council in 2020 was for a 12% wage increase by the end of 2024. This works out to between 3.4% and 3.8% per year (dated from the expiry of the previous enterprise agreement, which was generally in mid 2021). Obviously, even winning this full claim would result in a pay cut in real terms in the current inflationary environment.