

A big bargaining agenda: 258 days to build strength

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258 days from today, enterprise agreements expire at Sydney Uni, UTS, RMIT, UWA, and a string of other universities. This opens the period when we can renegotiate wages and conditions, and engage in legally protected industrial action to do so. Preparation being key to success, we reckon it's about time to set out an ambitious agenda to shake up bargaining in the NTEU.

This is a picture of a union bargaining team at a major hospital in Nevada, USA.



The organiser leading this bargaining team briefing is [Jane McAlevey](#). A few NTEU Fightback supporters sat in on her recent Strike School: we reckon there's a lot to learn from her in terms of organising technique – and about ambition. Bold, life-changing claims on conditions and pay are married with claims for social justice, and a systematic approach to organising and building union strength. As you can tell from the picture above, bargaining doesn't have to be about curling up in a small ball and hoping we don't get kicked too hard: it can be a major opportunity to engage with the entire workforce and build significant strikes.

At Strike School we heard from experienced organisers who helped to deliver strikes by 34,000 teachers in Los Angeles and 25,000 teachers in Chicago last year. Both had close to 100% participation. These organisers don't have supernatural powers: they just have a solid grasp of organising, and a relentless focus on contesting, rather than just accepting, bosses' and politicians' attacks. We're interested in [critiques](#) of McAlevey's work, but our union has also got plenty to learn.



Chicago teachers strike in 2012 - an important precursor for major US teachers strikes in 2018-19.

Strikes like the ones in Chicago and Los Angeles don't come out of nowhere. Careful, long term preparation comes in very handy, especially when we're taking on some of the most powerful employers in the country, aiming to win both life-changing improvements in working conditions, and a significant shift in the whole discussion around public funding and education.

Anyone who tuned in to NTEU Fightback's terrific [panel](#) last Monday, discussing higher education strikes in the UK and the US, might have seen the leaflet shared by Katy Fox-Hodess. The leaflet was issued by the grad student teachers union at University of California in the leadup to their successful 2014 contract campaign. It called for members to get involved in Contract Action Committees, to elect a delegate in every department, to start commenting on claims and building towards strikes. This was issued an incredible 333 days before their contract expired.

We're already a couple of months behind this ambitious schedule, but we were inspired enough to want to make up for lost time. So over coming weeks we'll be opening up a discussion on bargaining, and bargaining claims, for 2021. We'll be checking out the detailed clauses that govern our working lives, and how we can win changes in conditions, from job security and casual conversion through to "social good claims", challenging the profit-driven priorities of our higher education system.

Today, to kick us off, we'll start on pay.

Five reasons we deserve a pay rise

It's not very fashionable to say that workers deserve a substantial pay rise. But we do. Morrison [tut tuts](#) about ABC staff rejecting a pay freeze. Labor in [Queensland](#) and Coalition in [NSW](#) thank "health care

heroes”, and then give a pay freeze as a reward. Our union leadership continues to hawk around schemes to cut wages.

The construction unions in NSW are signing [enterprise agreements](#) with two 2.5% increases per year. So 5% seems a decent benchmark. Here are six reasons we should have a real wage increase in our log of claims.

- a) The corporate elite aren't scrimping and saving - so why should we? Internationally, the 2,000 or so individuals who make up the [billionaire class](#) increased their wealth by an incredible 27% between April and July, to a record \$US10 trillion. Here in Australia, [profits rose](#) by 14.9% in the past quarter, while total wages fell 2.5%. The rich internationally are the [main beneficiaries](#) of government handouts, and the same is true [here](#). If ordinary workers want our share, we're going to have to fight for it.
- b) Many workers in higher education have household members who have lost hours or their jobs altogether: our households depend on our pay.
- c) The amount of unpaid work done by workers across the university sector is always high, but it's gone through the roof in this year of Covid. A good pay rise is one way of getting something for these hours
- d) We'll discuss casual work in a future update, but its important to note that the casual academics who do over half of the teaching at Australian universities stay on the same pay grade, often for many years. Ongoing and fixed term academics at least get regular pay increments and the possibility of promotion. So a substantial pay rise helps this section of the workforce.
- e) Public sector workers generally have been told they don't deserve a pay rise: workers in higher education winning one would set a good example.
- f) The wage outcomes from the last round of bargaining were miserable, so university workers have seen real wages stagnate in recent years. In 2018, when inflation was around 2.1%, the strongest union branch in the country, at Sydney University, settled for annual pay rises of 2.2% (plus a \$500 sign on bonus and a flat \$500 lift in wage rates – equivalent to 0.8% for someone on the median female full time wage of \$64,000). Melbourne Uni settled on 2.1% and 2.2%. RMIT got 2% per year plus an \$800 sign on bonus.
If the strong don't win, the weak lose more. Murdoch branch settled for between 1 and 1.5% per year and lost a raft of conditions, in a deal that was hailed as “UNION WIN” by the NTEU's national office. Too many more wins like this, and we'll really be in trouble.

We'll get on to plenty of other issues in the days to come (258 of them). We're keen to get feedback and readers' ideas on priorities. We're also pretty sure that having any sort of serious go depends on a serious change in orientation from the line pushed by our union's leadership.