

Where to from here? An updated six point plan

The NTEU needs a reset. A national leadership which gets a seat at the bargaining table by offering concessions, rather than through the strength of its organised membership, is a sure sign of a union in deep trouble.

Back in May, NTEU Fightback [published](#) a “six point plan” to turn our union around.

Point one was to Vote No to the giant, nation-wide wage-cutting scheme known as the “National Jobs Protection Framework”. The National Framework featured wage cuts of up to fifteen percent, token or unenforceable “protections” for jobs, no enforceable guarantee that money saved from wage cuts would go towards jobs, and the destruction of change management/ consultation clauses.

The Framework wasn’t just a pathetic surrender in the face of crisis. It was an initiative that put the union on the wrong side: imposing austerity on every worker in the sector instead of battling against it. We wrote in May that Vote No was crucial because, “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.”

Shortly after, the Framework imploded. The NTEU leadership blamed the employers. The employers blamed “elements within the NTEU” who were threatening to derail the deal (ie, organised and angry rank and file workers, including us).

Good riddance. No matter what happens next, destroying the Framework is a victory worth having. Having 90% of the industry covered by a concessionary agreement would have been a serious step backwards.

Of course, the battles didn’t stop there, and neither have we. The NTEU’s national leadership are still pushing the wreckage of their disastrous Framework to anyone who will listen, and have successfully got their plan across the line on several campuses. They like to crow about it. We say that imposing concessions is a disgrace, not cause for union pride.

So there are plenty more battles over concessionary variations. There are massive cuts and job losses to campaign and organise against, spiralling workloads to dispute, and Dan Tehan’s plan for further neoliberal restructuring of the entire higher education sector to campaign against, in conjunction with the student campaign which is under way.

And crucially, amidst all these battles, there’s our industrial strength to build or rebuild. This is never going to happen from devising and imposing concessions. Nor are we going to build union strength by wishing unprotected industrial action into existence in the next couple of months: it requires serious and sustained organising.

So we've reworked our "six point plan" to reflect the new situation we're in. It's a work in progress, like any document written in the middle of a big fight. But we think that, like the original, it's a far preferable blueprint to the union leadership devising and imposing terrible, demoralising cuts on the members.

1. Vote No to changes for the worse in our enterprise agreements

Organising to Vote No to concessionary variations in our EAs is important – even where the odds are massively stacked against us. Especially where the union's national leadership swings behind concessions, they are likely to engineer a big majority for concessionary variations.

We think it is crucial to organise against all of these concessions. Each concession given, even if it is "minor" compared with the brutal wage cuts in the National Framework, will encourage VCs to push for further concessions.

There's an important difference between concessions being waved through by 90% plus of the workforce, and cases like the University of Western Australia and La Trobe where an active campaign managed to convince between 20% and 34% of people to vote against concessions. A substantial minority Voting No at least sends a signal to management, and to the union, that further demands for concessions will face substantial opposition.

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, it involves a systematic program of personal discussion and engagement with our fellow workers to argue that building capacity and willingness to take strike action is crucial for the defence and improvement of our pay, customs and job security. These are 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.

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

Organising to make an impact in a ballot to protect existing conditions 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.

A serious organising effort at Sydney University over the past couple of months has produced a major [controversy](#) about casual workers, with 400 workers [grilling](#) the Vice Chancellor and other senior managers at a town hall. Some branches have started organising around casual jobs and workloads. There's no guarantee of winning, but fighting at least puts us in with a chance and builds union strength.

NTEU Fightback members have a lot of experience in local disputes, often going through the "proper channels" of disputes clauses and the like, but doing so in with the largest possible degree of worker

participation, organising, and public controversy. So the successful [campaign against job cuts](#) at Sydney Uni in 2012 involved a long running formal dispute under the EA, combined with a vigorous campaign of mass protests coordinated by an open campaign committee. Smaller disputes over issues of dignity such as being able to have [pot plants](#) and union posters at work also illustrate the point: every injustice is an opportunity to organise.

RMIT might be regarded as a centre of union strength, but strength doesn't fall out of the sky: detailed work in disputes over bread and butter issues like water coolers and heaters have played [a crucial role](#) in building that strength. At Melbourne Uni as well, fights over jobs and more recent casuals organising has been crucial for laying the basis for union strength.

There is more detail about some of these fights in our document [Fighting Back Against Job Cuts](#), and in our [livestream](#) in mid May. Some of these disputes will lose, some will win, all are worth having if they build union strength. We need hundreds of these disputes across higher education, and we need to join them up.

3. 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 at a university level and beyond.

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

4. 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's 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 CTU'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 Chicago teachers' model (centred around detailed workplace organising, and building and connecting local disputes). That effort eventually [led to](#) the incredible wave of teacher strikes in the US in [2018](#) and [2019](#).

The major medium term focus for all of our organising has to be the next bargaining round, with enterprise agreements expiring at several major campuses. 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 the model of the Chicago teachers and work to a similar plan in our own circumstances.

5. Keeping our eye on the prize: public funding for public education

Along with methodical local organising work, the activists who turned around the Chicago Teachers Union kept a constant focus on the big picture: how terrible conditions and bullying management at individual schools are connected to the overall starving of funds from public schools, and the private interests busily carving up public education budgets across the US.

Though the CTU wasn't legally permitted to bargain on anything outside wages and pensions, the union used the lead-up to the 2012 strike to engage members and communities on the wider issues of funding, power and public education in Chicago and beyond. Everyone in Chicago knew that the CTU was bargaining for better schools and smaller classes, despite these not being legally mandated bargaining subjects. We should be doing the same thing here with university funding.

“Engagement” doesn't just mean a couple of facebook photos. We should be acting on issues of deep concern to both students and staff now and raising them during bargaining. Just a few examples, there will be many more:

- Clauses prohibiting functions being outsourced to contractors on lower wages.
- Campaigns to insource crucial jobs such as cleaning, security and IT, on established EA rates (there have been several such campaigns in UK universities).
- Clauses mandating a minimum number of student support staff, both academic and non academic.
- And crucially, clauses that put easily enforceable limits on workloads, and that make significant inroads on the proportion of teaching done by insecurely employed staff.

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 NTEU Fightback.

On the other hand, giving a good shakeup to the incumbents who have advocated 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, our capacity and preparedness to take industrial action where it matters the most – in the workplace.

There is nothing easy about any plan to turn things around, especially in the current crisis conditions. We know there are plenty of knocks to come.

Each of the steps above requires a lot of organising. The positive is, that's exactly what a large and growing number of workers across the country are already doing – getting active and organised to talk to our workmates.

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 to start serious local disputes over jobs and workloads – and in doing so, develop workers' organising and industrial power for the many battles to come.