

# How the NTEU National Executive manufactures consent

## 1. Engage in push polling – and then hide most of the results

Some NTEU branches have polled their members. The results have been used to claim widespread support for concessions on wages and conditions in our enterprise agreements.

However the only branch we know of to release the full results of their poll is the Curtin University branch of the NTEU – and the results are revealing. Though 69% of respondents at Curtin agree with the general proposition that “we should all be willing to make some sacrifices to minimise job losses and protect incomes”, this support falls dramatically once the questions move to specific concessions.

**Only 22% agree with being forced to work part time, and only 28% agree to a pay reduction of between 5 and 10%.** Yet the national leadership (and many local leaderships) have hidden these figures and have negotiated measures which will allow employers to impose a ten percent reduction in hours, a wage rate reduction of up to ten percent – with a total cut to pay allowed of 10% or 15%, depending on whether the university is classed as “Category A” or “Category B”.

Since the NTEU’s national leadership seem a bit shy about admitting how unpopular the core, wage-cutting, “cost savings” measures of the Framework actually are, we’ve included the results of the Curtin survey in our publicly available Vote NO campaign [resources folder](#).

Of course, there’s a more fundamental point here: these polls are premised on the idea that concessions on wages and conditions will save jobs – when there is simply no guarantee of that. The national leadership have engaged in push polling, buried results that don’t suit them, and then publicised partial results to manufacture a veneer of support for rightly unpopular measures.

## 2. Mislead members about what is being negotiated and when

In an email of 15 May, NTEU National President Alison Barnes writes, answering a FAQ:

### ***Why has the NTEU been negotiating in secret without member endorsement?***

*The negotiations have not been secret. In an email on 16 March we advised that we were looking at negotiating ways to protect jobs in a crisis of collapsing university incomes where there is little or no real government support.*

This appears to refer to a single line in an email that states: “NTEU reps right across the country are in urgent discussions with university administrations seeking protections for all university staff.” – and then goes on to talk about winning two weeks of coronavirus leave.

There is no reference to the National Framework, nor to reduction in hours, the gutting of major change clauses, or to wage cuts – let alone to the scale of wage cuts, introduced by the Framework, which can see a worker on the median full time female wage of \$65,000 per year having her pay cut by \$375 per fortnight.

If you want to check, search your emails for the phrase quoted above – it’s probably in an email received on 16 March or a few days after (bulk email can be a bit slow). Then judge for yourself whether this is sufficient notice of negotiations on dramatic cuts in pay and conditions.

On April 3 the NTEU National Executive passed a resolution about the national framework negotiations then underway with Vice Chancellors. As the [Guardian](#) later revealed, these included a

motion allowing “general reductions in Agreement rates” to be part of the national framework. NE communications have never mentioned these potential wage reductions.

On April 24, National Councillors were informed verbally that a reduction in wage rates was under discussion. So was a proposal for employers to be able to impose a reduction in fraction (hours) of ten per cent.

National Councillors were told that “negotiations have gone on so long” that “most of the talking has been done” in negotiations with the core group of universities. Yet it was only on April 28, when a Western Australian Division email to members included “reduction in wages” in a list of cost savings under negotiation (with no detail provided), that any members were notified in writing that wage cuts were under negotiation.

### **3. Hold a farcical “meeting of National Councillors” to give a veneer of support**

On April 24, the NTEU National Executive convened a meeting of National Councillors. The NE ignored the requirement to give two weeks notice for a legal meeting of the National Council (designed to allow for consultation with members on contentious questions). Instead, it sidestepped the rules by dubbing the briefing a “meeting of National Councillors” rather than a “meeting of National Council”.

Only ten minutes were given during the two-hour meeting to voices opposed to the NE’s approach. The NE rammed a vote through, disregarding the rules and democratic norms, so they could claim support from National Councillors for their deeply unpopular position.

This bodgy procedure was compounded in an email to members at Monash University from the NTEU branch president NTEU, stating that “the NTEU National Council – the peak representative body for the union nationally – has signed off on a negotiation framework for discussions with Vice-Chancellors”.

### **4. Push through votes based on this partial information**

Many NTEU members, dependent on official union communications, simply haven’t heard about the fierce debate raging in the union. These members can see only the partial results of push-polling, the misleading reporting in official union channels of what is being negotiated, and the manufactured consent from a briefing of National Councillors. So it’s no surprise that NTEU branches have voted to continue negotiations.

What’s remarkable is the incredibly widespread opposition to the NE’s approach of collaborating with VCs. Members have voted to reject its approach at the three largest and best organised branches in the country (Melbourne, RMIT, and Sydney – twice), as well as members meetings at the University of New England, UNSW, Flinders Uni and La Trobe, while Monash had a tied vote.

Other branches have had substantial minorities opposing the NE, for instance UQ a critical motion lost by 42 to 50 with 12 abstentions. The Victoria University meeting ended in uproar as the poll was botched, with the official record showing a narrow win for the NE but many members incensed at the chair refusing to call a vote on a motion opposing concessions.

We’ve heard from a few places that the NE is claiming support from meetings at ANU and Canberra Uni. It might be news to people on these campuses that they had endorsed one side or another in a vigorous national debate. On April 1, a meeting of the two campuses voted for a motion that endorsed: “continuing sector wide discussions with UA, AHEIA, and other relevant bodies on a sector wide response to COVID-19; [and] continuing to pursue guarantees from universities to protect staff pay and conditions”.

This was a week *before* the first public acknowledgement that there were negotiations going on which could lead to substantial concessions – an email to members by NTEU General Secretary Matt McGowan sent on April 8. And the motion passed at the Canberra universities endorsed the leadership acting to “*protect* staff pay and conditions” – not to participate in *cutting* pay and conditions as they are doing. Hardly a ringing endorsement of the NE approach.

#### **5. Use all of the above to manufacture a sense of: “it’s a done deal, everyone supports it”**

Of course, *no one* has voted to support *any* concessions, or anything close to it – for the very good reason that members have been kept in the dark about what is being negotiated.

It’s clear that university administrations and the government are using this crisis to push through major attacks, including on our EA conditions. We shouldn’t let them.

The deal is *not* done. We have plenty to fight for. It’s time to step up our organising to Vote NO on May 25.

#### **6. A simple solution:**

The national executive should immediately

- distribute information from both sides of the debate
- allow a formal, nationally broadcast debate with equal time for both sides
- release all the EA clauses which have been negotiated, and give a summary of the negotiating parameters of every clause still being negotiated
- Release their own modelling about the impact of a 10% cut and a 15% cut in wages on
  - A worker on the median full time female wage of \$65,000 (our figure is \$250 or \$375 per fortnight – what’s theirs?)
  - Other pay rates reflecting common university EA classifications (our figures available in “Wage cuts table” in our [Vote NO campaign resources folder](#))

If their Framework is so good, what do they have to hide?