

# "Business as usual" during the October strike? We think NOT!

According to Management propaganda, the fifth and sixth days of the NTEU strike would have minimal impact on the daily operations of The University of Sydney because staff would simply work from home. This is far from the truth. To begin with, six graduation ceremonies were postponed, presumably to avoid the embarrassment of parents and students being stopped at picket lines to be informed that USyd's operating model is short-changing fee-paying students by cutting corners with their education, and meanwhile pocketing a billion dollar surplus last financial year. Awkward! Contrary to Management's strikebreaking directives to move teaching online, countless lectures, tutorials, seminars, workshops, assessments and meetings were cancelled or deferred (see below). Of those classes that were not moved online, many were disrupted or closed down by enthusiastic and tech-savvy student supporters of the strike. These Zoom picketers are a completely new type of activist, born out of necessity during these strikes.

Meanwhile, at all the main university entrances, vibrant picket lines enthusiastically turned back countless deliveries, contract workers, students, staff and visitors. Admittedly there were no tumbleweeds rolling down Eastern Avenue, but the place was so deserted that you could hear the chants on one picket line from another picket on the other side of the campus. Business as usual at USyd during the strike? We think not!

Below is a small but representative set of examples of work at Sydney University that was not performed as a result of the October 13-14 strike. It is a subset of responses to an online survey of striking union members. Teaching, research, supervision (including of completing students), and administration were all seriously affected. In some cases, crucial deadlines were missed. The full amount work not being done due to our strike is, of course, far greater than this list.

Chemistry laboratories have been cancelled

Classes in a large first-year Maths unit have been cancelled on both days

I've cancelled two hours of seminar teaching including three student workshops of final assessment drafts

Cancelling meetings.

I won't be checking the inbox to respond to student enquiries.

Not teaching.

Zero work performed on the day. Meeting with my research student cancelled.

Not responding to student emails or providing administrative support.

I will not be completing a day of work as a professional staff member during one of our busiest times of the year.

Members will not be running 6 Hours (2 classes) of Student Workshop.

I am not running 2 hours of tutorials. My School has cancelled 2 x seminars that were scheduled to be held 13 & 14. I have postponed a meeting with the research office.

My team will need to liaise with, and onboard, short course students for an upcoming course, which will not be able to be completed by attending the strike.

My striking colleagues and I will not be scheduling units of study for 2023 which may delay the release of the draft schedule (currently listed for 21st November).

I won't be marking the weekly task for a 3000-level unit that I usually do.

I will not be answering any emails from students. I won't be teaching a seminar.

I will not be running two hours of my seminars in a capstone course.

I won't be attending a meeting relating to future research collaboration with industry partners.

I will have to defer feedback to an Hons student who is about to submit and will not deal with marking or admin.

Will not be running my 2 Thursday tutorials (2X one-hour tutes)

I'll not be teaching a 1-hr lecture and 2 x 2-hr seminars.

Marking! I have 55+ papers to mark.

The Student Centre will not open on the strike days

No exam planning or facilitation; no educational design work; no consultations

I will not be processing short term exchange academic approvals/endorsements (currently 1000+ students have submitted requests)

**WE ARE THE UNIVERSITY – WE CAN SHUT IT DOWN!**

## Call out for next issue and contact RAFA

Do you have a report from your workplace area at the University of Sydney? RAFA would love to hear from you. Let us know the challenges you face, the types of conversations you and your colleagues are having, and your ideas to take the struggle forward by writing to: [rafausyd@gmail.com](mailto:rafausyd@gmail.com), contact us on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, or call Jean on 0449 646 593.

# Rank and File Action Bulletin #3

October 20 2022



## Vote for a 2 hour stop-work meeting in week 13

### Branch Committee motion

Our campaign so far has made significant progress on professional staff workload, flexible and remote work rights, leave including gender transition and affirmation leave, and internal advertising of professional staff vacancies. But management have still not made acceptable offers on job-security, managing change, 40:40:20, decasualisation, casuals' rights or pay.

This leaves us with no choice but to continue our campaign for as long as necessary, including into next year.

Therefore, we vote either:

A. to strike and picket for at least 24 hours on Wednesday November 2 AND hold a stop-work meeting at a later point.

VOTE NO

or

B. to hold a 2-hour in-person mass stop-work meeting on Wednesday November 2 to discuss and vote on escalation over the summer break and into semester 1, 2023.

VOTE YES

Management is not going to produce the decent, fair EBA offer we need and deserve before the end of this semester. This means the branch needs to prepare to strike, enact work bans, and disrupt University operations in 2023.

Despite the success of our strikes, another one this semester would be neither sufficient nor tactical. We support a 2-hour stop-work mass meeting where members can come together to flesh out proposals for new work bans and strikes in early 2023.

A mass face-to-face meeting will give our branch much-needed space for discussion and planning that will allow us to return after the summer break with an escalating campaign that will force management to concede our key demands. We are well placed to win this. Our capacity for interrupting business as usual has grown over the course of the campaign. In last week's strike we confronted online strike-breaking over Zoom. Jagose sent threats to our union. Management have hidden behind the idea of Zoom classes to pretend our strikes have no effect. We have exposed that as a lie.

We can see evidence for how widely our actions are supported, and also can identify areas where we need more work to build union power.

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## Bargaining update: We need to keep up the fight

We are a long way from a fair agreement! Management have not withdrawn their attacks on:

- professional staff internal hiring rights at HEO 8-9
- 40/40/20 academic workloads

We have no agreement yet on:

- improved casual conversion rights
- ending wage theft
- sick pay for casual staff
- improved job security and change management
- 800 new jobs for decasualisation with fair access for casuals
- fair workloads and conversion rights for EFRs
- a minimum ratio of 50% academic staff in balanced roles.

And we still don't have a pay offer, let alone one above CPI!

Strikes have successfully brought some of our biggest wins, including stopping the attacks on workload committees, forcing the offer of 300 jobs (though this is insufficient and with bad access for casuals) and saving internal professional staff rights at HEO 1-7 (though not level 8). We're having a genuine impact. There's no way we'd be where we are now without the concerted effort and organising of union members. Thanks to everyone who has brought us this far, and to every new and old member who has stuck with the campaign.

We need to keep up the pressure into 2023 if we want to make serious improvements to our contracts, and stand for decent education.

## The new front: Taking on Zoom strike-breaking

When Management directed staff to teach online in an attempt to weaken the efficacy of our strike, they opened up a new front in our industrial campaign. In response, the NTEU Sydney Uni branch campaigned against Zoom classes as strikebreaking, whilst student supporters led a push to extend picketing online for the first time.

From our first strikes in May, management made it clear that they would be using Zoom classes and work from home protocols developed during the pandemic to undermine our strikes and picket lines. So while the physical campus was shut down in May, there was a feeling that in some cases classes and meetings had simply moved online.

In response, student groups mobilised to disrupt scab Zoom classes during the August 17 strike action. This enabled them to test new forms of picketing – virtual picketing – and to take the struggle online. Inspired by the 'roaming pickets' on campus that disrupted and shut down classes during the strike, the students collected a list of scheduled Zoom classes, then logged on and disrupted them. Frequently that disruption was undertaken on the physical picket lines, with students and staff interrupting the classes as they chanted and spoke live from their positions on the pickets. As a result of these actions at least one class was cancelled.

Infuriated, management sent disciplinary letters to the online picketers, accusing them of misconduct. Both students and staff mobilised to defend those students. Students launched a campaign with the slogan "Wage theft is a crime, Zoom picketing isn't", along with a petition in support of the accused, which was signed by many students and staff. The USYD NTEU Branch Committee also passed a motion in support of the students and condemning the disciplinary action that noted *"As a part of our picket protocols, union members are expected to stop students and staff and explain the importance of our campaign and why they should respect the picket line and help us win a better quality of education and fair working conditions."*



*The fact that this student entered a Zoom class and attempted to explain the importance of our demands is no reason to silence them."* The combined pressure resulted in the disciplinary proceedings being dropped and the Zoom picketing tactic receiving increased interest and popularity.

Having been pioneered during the Aug 17 strike, the scope of the Zoom disruption campaign was greatly expanded for the Oct 13-14 strikes. In the weeks before the October strike staff campaigned to stop colleagues teaching online, and get them to join the union and strike. Students put up posters calling on students and staff to supply links to any scab Zoom classes to an online form, successfully eliciting many more links than the last strike. Clearly rattled, management sent emails to staff in the lead-up to the October strike with instructions on how to prevent "Zoom bombing."

On the strike days, a group of 15 students used the Zoom links they had gathered to join Zoom classes one at a time, disrupting them with speeches and chants from the physical picket line. (cont. next page)

If a student was removed or muted, another would then join the same Zoom class, continuing the disruptions.

These actions led to around 10 classes being cancelled. The novelty of these tactics has generated media interest, with largely sympathetic articles published in The Australian and in The Guardian.

The Zoom disruption campaign shows that solidarity is

## Marking bans and flat marking: Widening our tactics for 2023

After fifteen months of bargaining, there is still a great deal of distance between management's position and our core claims. We must, therefore, send a strong signal to management that we intend to intensify and broaden our industrial action campaign across the end of this year and into Semester 1 of 2023. We must continue to grow our membership – now one of the fastest growing branches in the country – and to deepen engagement across our campaign.

Adding marking bans and flat marking to our industrial action toolkit will help achieve these aims. The prospect of any disruption to grading is a serious concern for management – even just voting up a Protected Action Ballot would provoke anxiety for Scott and Jagose. We've seen in the UK the incredible success of marking bans—alongside strikes and pickets—in defending and expanding working conditions and pay.

Marking bans were a complementary tactic to strikes and pickets for the NTEU from its founding until 2013. Lecturers and tutors refused to release grades through University systems for a defined period of time, disrupting a wide array of administrative processes including enrolments, course transfers, and more. Accompanied by admin bans by professional staff, this would gum up the works of the whole University.

Flat marking, on the other hand, is a novel proposal that would see lecturers and tutors grade all assessments at a single, 'flat' grade – ideally, a HD grade. Inspired by the 'ungrading' pedagogical movement, a flat marking tactic disrupts the University by rendering course grades illegible to management and administrative functions. Such a tactic would provoke widespread conversation, enhancing our ability to recruit members, and would likely be popular amongst students.

These tactics can work well in concert. A flat marking campaign might begin partway through Semester 1 2023 (after some advertising and recruitment in the first part of semester), followed by a marking ban on the final exam results at the end of the semester. (Somewhat amusingly, we can even refuse to release grades and then grade them with flat marks when we do release them.) This enables us to build smoothly from the one tactic to the other and grow our union along the way.

It is critical that these tactics are seen as complements to strike action. Any attempt to represent these as substitutes or alternatives must be rejected. Ongoing tactics like flat marking and work bans will strengthen our union's day-to-day industrial presence, forming a critical avenue for engaging members and staff who may not be willing to strike or picket. The concentrated disruption of strikes and pickets is, therefore, strengthened by such

our greatest strength, in this case solidarity between staff and students. If we take action together, but with a fair assessment of the relative advantages of our positions, even hostile environments like management-controlled Zoom classes are ours. We are the University!!



tactics – and the collective experience of strikes and pickets provides a necessary political fortitude for unionists engaged in flat marking and bans.

There are some conditions that must be attached to both tactics. First, despite some repeated myths, marking bans or flat marking are not illegal forms of industrial action. In 2013, the Fair Work Commission did order suspensions of marking bans at Swinburne University on the basis of student welfare. (Flat marking, meanwhile, is wholly untested by the FWC.) From our research, it appears that this decision was the major turning point in the NTEU's use of marking bans. But the FWC, in its ruling, described the case as "one that is on the borderline." In order to sustain these actions, we would need to carefully calibrate an exemptions regime that permits the release of grades in such a way that ensures that no part of the student population is harmed. This is a technical task, and one that we can readily resolve.

Second, university management are likely to respond strongly to marking bans or flat marking. This could involve the suspension of pay for staff involved in the action, as happened in 2012 to staff at UNSW. It is therefore critical to ensure there is financial support, through our own strike funds and the National Defence Fund. We must also make sure that as many of us as possible commit to marking bans and flat marking because leaving it to only a few to engage in these tactics would leave them to bear the brunt of management's retaliation alone. Crucially, we must be willing to take immediate strike action in response to any adverse reaction to these tactics by the University. For instance, if management suspends the pay of members involved in flat marking or marking bans, we will go out on strike in defense of our membership until management withdraw any threats to pay.

Our campaign is a fight for everyone at this University, and one that management has intransigently opposed. Deepening and extending our campaign by adopting marking bans and flat marking is a critical step towards escalation. Ours is a righteous fight, and one that we can win. Let's get on with it.