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Australian universities advised to avoid being 'roped into' multi-employer bargaining, leaked strategy reveals

Union calls document 'incontrovertible proof' institutions using 'concerted' plan to drive down wages

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Universities are being advised how to avoid being "roped into" **multi-employer bargaining** for better wages and pay conditions, a leaked roadmap has revealed.

The strategy roadmap written by the Australian Higher Education Industrial Association, which represents more than 32 tertiary institutions, gives advice to universities about three enterprise agreement scenarios under Labor's multi-employer bargaining reforms, which will come into effect in June.

For universities seeking to maintain a single agreement, the roadmap advises a rollover of existing terms with a "reasonable salary offer" and "minimum changes" will "greatly increase" chances of a deal, protecting institutions from being "roped in" to a multi-employer agreement.

If bargaining meetings with the union are resisted, the roadmap says universities should consider putting proposed pay offers directly to staff.

Advising how universities can approach intractable bargaining processes, it says "having non-agreed matters arbitrated may give you some success in redressing poor clauses down to community standards", including redundancy processes, reviews and misconduct.

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The National Tertiary Education Union said the leaked document provided "incontrovertible proof" that universities were using a "concerted game plan" to drive down wages and attack worker's conditions.

"Instead of negotiating with the NTEU in good faith, employers are more concerned with trying to ram through sub-standard agreements before multi-employer bargaining becomes more widely available," said the union's general secretary, Dr Damien Cahill.

"We've suspected this was the case ... now the truth has been exposed. We are seeing deliberate tactics to rush staff into accepting offers that don't give them fair pay rises."

Cahill said the NTEU had been "quite open" about enterprise bargaining remaining the primary way it would continue to negotiate with public universities.

He said the union had reached agreements with employers at Western Sydney University, the University of Tasmania, the Australian Catholic University and Queensland's University of Technology and was close to reaching agreement with other institutions.

An enterprise agreement proposal at Curtin University that went to a vote without the backing of the NTEU after negotiations stalled was overwhelmingly rejected by staff.

"The NTEU will not be intimidated by attempts to circumvent the best interests of our members," Cahill said.

Executive director of the Australian Higher Education Industrial Association, Craig Laughton, said the union's claims were "far fetched and fanciful".

"There have been significant changes to the industrial relations landscape and ... it is our role to provide guidance to our members," he said.

"AHEIA's recommendation ... is to work with their local union representatives and essentially offer a 'rollover' on their existing enterprises agreement ... and offer a genuine wage increase to address the inflationary pressure currently being experienced by their employees.

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"It defies logic to see how this approach could be interpreted as an 'attack on conditions'. This approach is aimed at expediting wage relief for employees across the higher education sector and certainty for university planners as the sector recovers post-Covid."

Laughton said there was no "secret plan" to drive down wages in the sector and it made "no sense" to alienate the most important stakeholder of universities: staff.

"The preferred option for our members is to work through negotiations with their local union representatives," he said.

"Members who do take the vote directly to their staff (without union consent) do not do so lightly and such measures are almost always taken after a significant period of unproductive and intractable discussions with the union."

The AHEIA's roadmap includes a link to [slides](#) from a presentation given in December by the former vice-president of the Fair Work Commission, Graeme Watson, on Labor's industrial relations changes. Watson also acted as a senior industrial relations adviser to the former Coalition minister Christian Porter.

Watson's presentation lays out the implications of the changes, including the bargaining capacity of unions, under what conditions protected industrial action can be taken and whether compulsory arbitration can be used.

"Note that the right to terminate an enterprise agreement is effectively no longer available without employee agreement," the presentation says.

Watson was approached for comment.