

Behind the “day of action”: Australian university union enforces government agenda

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Academics and general staff from 16 Australian universities participated in work stoppages last Wednesday to fight against a new wave of attacks on jobs and conditions, driven by the global financial crisis and the so-called “Education Revolution” of the Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

Votes of more than 80 percent for 24-hour stoppages in 32 separate postal ballots at individual universities showed a determination to oppose soaring class sizes, increasing workloads, casualisation and university management demands for short-term contracts, “individual flexibility arrangements” and prolonged probationary periods.

There is also an emerging realisation that far from reversing the previous Howard government’s assault on universities and public education, Labor is in fact intensifying the offensive. Having bailed out the banks and sections of business to the tune of billions of dollars, the government is intent on cutting spending on education and other essential social services in order to impose the burden on working people.

But the purpose of the limited “day of action” called by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) was to suppress any political struggle against Labor’s agenda, while further cementing the union’s collaboration with the government and university managements in implementing it.

Less than half the country’s 38 public universities were involved because the NTEU has struck deals at the other institutions, or is in the process of doing so, to deliver key concessions that will facilitate the sweeping changes unveiled by Education Minister Julia Gillard earlier this year following the government’s Bradley Review of higher education.

At union branch meetings at Macquarie University and the University of Western Sydney in the week before the strike, Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporters called for city-wide meetings of university staff to discuss a unified industrial and political campaign against the government’s measures and its continued financial starvation of universities. The resolution also called for a joint industrial and political campaign with school teachers, parents and students against the government’s planned “league tables” and other pro-business measures contained in the Education Revolution.

NTEU officials and branch committee members vehemently objected, declaring that SEP supporters were “conflating” industrial

and political issues. At Macquarie University, some accused the union branch president, Carolyn Kennett, who moved the SEP resolution, of “leveraging a political agenda” onto an industrial dispute. Some academics claimed that it was “illegal” to advocate a political struggle at a union meeting.

These claims were designed to block political opposition to Labor’s program. While the NTEU is hostile to the SEP’s politics, it is pursuing a definite political agenda of its own—complete support for the Rudd government, whose policies it is seeking to enforce via agreements with universities.

Just a day before the September 16 stoppages, two further universities—Sydney and James Cook—were exempted from industrial action after reaching settlements with the union. The NTEU issued a media release hailing the Sydney University agreement as a “groundbreaking new collective workplace agreement” that would be a “template for the industry”.

This “groundbreaking” agreement, which is yet to be ratified by union members, allows the university to ramp up the use of casual and fixed-term employment. It also provides for a “confirmation period” of up to five years during which new academics can be terminated (on top of a 12-month probation period) and introduces an “individual flexibility” clause as required by the government’s new “Fair Work” legislation. The supposed limits on casual teaching of 5 percent of face-to-face class time are meaningless—they apply only “as far as operational needs permit”.

In return, the university is offering a pay rise of 15 percent over 27 months, which barely covers the rising cost of living, let alone reversing the substantial decline in real salaries over previous decades. For the NTEU, however, the agreement has major benefits—a rent-free union office on campus, guaranteed payroll deduction of union dues, 50 percent payment of the union branch president’s salary, “reasonable time off” for other union representatives, and membership of management-staff workload and consultative committees.

Universities across the country are pursuing similar demands, driven by the Rudd government’s effective three-year federal funding freeze, the impact of the economic crisis on university investments and corporate sponsorship, and preparations for the government’s Bradley Review restructuring.

The Bradley blueprint features what is essentially a voucher system,

whereby universities will become “demand-driven”. Instead of receiving block grants, they will be paid according to the number of students they attract to their courses. All the core learning and teaching grants will also be conditional on as-yet-unspecified performance and productivity targets. In order to survive, universities will have to compete in offering courses that are vocationally-oriented, attract corporate sponsorship or are cheap to teach (see “Labor government continues to starve Australian universities”).

Class sizes, workloads and casualisation rates will inevitably soar. In fact, they are already rising rapidly because universities have over-enrolled this year as the first step toward the new system.

When the Howard government attempted to introduce similar measures, first under Education Minister David Kemp and then under his successor, Brendan Nelson, they were forced to retreat in the face of an outcry. Yet the Rudd government is now proceeding with the backing of the education unions, including the NTEU, whose leaders have the closest of relations with Gillard.

NTEU president Carolyn Allport has declared that the Bradley “reforms” are “a critical part of the nation building agenda”—underscoring the union’s backing for Labor’s Education Revolution. This “revolution”—in reality a counter-revolution—seeks to subordinate every aspect of education, from early-childhood onward, to the drive to make corporate Australia more profitable and competitive on the global market.

Like the rest of the trade union movement, the NTEU is also policing Labor’s “Fair Work” industrial laws, which go even further than Howard’s “Work Choices” laws in banning virtually all strikes. Labor’s legislation outlaws any form of solidarity industrial action and prohibits industry-wide stoppages (“pattern bargaining”). Even after a workplace agreement has expired, workers must “bargain in good faith” with their employer, potentially for many months, and then submit to a union-conducted postal ballot, before taking any industrial action.

These laws, which the NTEU and other union leaders all voted for at Labor Party and Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) congresses, are being utilised to atomise and straitjacket workers, keeping them isolated from each other and broader sections of the working class.

On September 16, the NTEU’s picket line protocols instructed its members not to ask other workers to honour the picket line, so as not to infringe Labor’s laws. As for the students, they were simply told to go home because classes had been cancelled. Neither the NTEU nor the student unions held on-campus rallies or fought to politically mobilise students behind the staff, because that would have meant coming into conflict with the government.

Behind the NTEU’s “no politics” edict, the union’s leadership is dominated by Labor Party figures and relies heavily on the support of all of the petty-bourgeois tendencies—including Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance—along with the Greens. Members of these groups are deeply embedded as branch office-holders, where they work hand in glove with the federal and state officials.

Above all, these organisations oppose any struggle against the Labor government and instead promote the deadly illusion that it can be pressured in a progressive direction. They remain completely silent on the Bradley plan, let alone the role of the previous Labor governments of Hawke and Keating. In 1986, Labor began the commercialisation of tertiary education by imposing fees on international students, followed by the re-introduction of fees for domestic students in 1987. Since then, overseas students have become a cash cow for Australian capitalism, generating fees and other income of about \$15 billion a year.

During the last round of enterprise bargaining under the Howard government, the NTEU urged its members to give up crucial conditions, such as ending restrictions on fixed-term positions, so that universities could obtain extra funding under Howard’s legislation. At the time, the union claimed that the concessions would be reversed with the advent of a Labor government. Now, having campaigned for a Labor victory in 2007, the union is preparing to enforce deeper attacks under Rudd.

The NTEU’s record is part of a wider political process. Over the past three decades, the globalisation of production has transformed the trade unions into mechanisms for extracting concessions from their members in order to make “their” national economies globally competitive.

In order to halt the offensive against university staff and students, and public education at all levels, a complete political break from these apparatuses is essential. New independent organisations are needed, including rank-and-file committees of teachers, parents and students.

The fact that the renewed assault on education is being mounted by Labor—which all the unions claimed represented a “lesser evil” to the Liberals—points to the necessity for an alternative political perspective. University staff, together with the rest of the working class, need to build a new party, one based on a socialist program that gives the priority to social need, including free, first class education for all, not corporate profit.



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