

Australian academics' strike at UNSW: a few observations from the ISSE

Mathew Benn
19 September 2009

Academics and general staff at the University of New South Wales went on strike last Wednesday as part of the National Tertiary Education Union's "National Day of Action". Members of the International Students for Social Equality—which has a club on campus—visited the picket lines and spoke to strikers.

Staff are opposing restructuring plans by university management. If implemented, these will see class sizes increase (even further), with lecturers taking on extra teaching and administration responsibilities, all with zero additional funding. Faculties are already chronically under-resourced. The restructuring also involves an erosion of academic tenure in favour of individual contracts.

The strike was a dismal affair. Classes mostly continued as normal, and most students did not seem to know that a strike was on. The University's Vice-Chancellor Fred Hilmer emailed all 39,000 students instructing them that classes would continue as usual and warning all staff that it was illegal for non-NTEU members to take strike action.

Only 16 percent of the staff at UNSW are unionised, and they are spread across three unions: the Community Public Sector Union, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the NTEU. The NTEU has kept its members isolated from the others, refusing to call out members of any other unions. They issued no call for a student strike. Effectively the NTEU instructed staff to comply with Hilmer's threats.

The union's role in splitting and isolating strikers ensured the most sectional and conservative outlook predominated. When the ISSE asked one lecturer about the conditions for lecturers and general staff at UNSW, he replied "General staff? What have they got to do with it?"

Very few academics joined the picket-lines at the university entrances that commenced at 7 a.m. and ran through to midday. But considering the picket line "protocols", distributed and enforced by the NTEU, this lack of staff enthusiasm was not surprising. The NTEU instructed picketers not to ask members of other unions, or non-unionists, to respect the picket line, because they would then be taking "unprotected industrial action", rendering them liable to fines and disciplinary action.

At lunchtime, when a rally was held at the main entrance, about 150 people turned up, and most of these were building workers from the Construction Forestry and Mining Employees Union who were working on site and came down to show their support.

The rally was dominated politically by various petty-bourgeois tendencies, including Socialist Alternative, the Revolutionary Socialist Party (a breakaway faction from the Democratic Socialist Perspective that prints "Direct Action") and Socialist Alliance. The only students present were those from Socialist Alternative's campus club, along with some members from Solidarity's group at University of Sydney.

These groups, along with the NTEU, ensured the rally was utterly depoliticised. There was no discussion about the agenda of the Rudd Labor government, or why the strike was so isolated. Instead, the secret agreements struck by the NTEU at University of Sydney and James Cook University (where strike action had been called off just 48 hours earlier) were held up as "victories".

Representatives of Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance called for a similar outcome at UNSW, i.e., an enterprise deal with management, or, in the words of the

NTEU's web site: "to secure new collective bargaining agreements".

ISSE members did not hear a single criticism or even reference to the Bradley Review or the "Education Revolution" that are at the centre of Labor's plan to base education funding on student enrolment numbers, part of plans for a "voucher system" that was first mooted under the former Howard government (see: "Labor government continues to starve Australian universities"). Instead, the speakers confined staff and students to a narrow trade outlook centred on enterprise bargaining.

Despite having the word "socialist" in their name, the various petty-bourgeois groups functioned as little more than an adjunct to the union, serving to block any discussion about the development of a political struggle against the Rudd government's pro-market education reforms. It was bargain basement politics. One would never guess from these speakers that global capitalism is facing its most severe economic crisis since the 1930s and that the attacks at UNSW are part of a new assault being brought forward by the Rudd government against every section of the working class.

Susan Price, a member of the Socialist Alliance and president of the NTEU branch at UNSW spoke at the rally. Price claimed that greater regulation was needed to "reverse the trend at UNSW". However, she made no attempt to explain how reaching a deal at UNSW could "reverse the trend" under conditions of a three-year budget freeze being enforced by Rudd against the entire tertiary sector.

Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative members dutifully helped the NTEU distribute its flyer at university entrances, calling for "professional rights and respect" and "workload regulation". "A strong collective agreement can ensure that pressure from workloads is relieved and that job security is increased". A Socialist Alternative member told students at one entrance: "don't come on campus—there's a strike on", yet this ultimatum was the beginning and end of all discussion. These groups act to stultify political consciousness, and in doing so alienate students from a genuine socialist perspective and analysis.

There is a near continuous stream of construction work occurring on campus at UNSW. ISSE members met up

with some workers from the CFMEU who had decided to support the strike—while not participating in it. The workers told the ISSE that they would only be able to attend the rally during their lunch break. This was because Labor's industry watch dog (the ABCC) would ensure any unprotected industrial action would end in a six-month jail sentence and the loss of their job.

One building worker told the ISSE: "I came out for the teachers but it's not just about them. You see, if someone sees me talking to you, I could get thrown in jail. So we told them to dock our pay when we're on strike ... When Labor came in they promised the unions that they were with us. I have 25 years in this industry and you always pressure Labor but nothing gets done. There used to be streets full of strikes. You'd get 40,000 to 50,000 easy on a big rally. But you can go to jail now for going on strike."

Martin Wyer from the CFMEU told the rally that a decision by the CFMEU to join the university strike would have incurred a \$150,000 fine. He urged staff to further their industrial action while they still had the chance: "the ALP will not jail you ... Take the opportunity now." However, neither he nor any of the petty-bourgeois groups at the rally raised a word in opposition against the Rudd government's Fair Work industrial laws that have retained and built upon the previous Howard government's draconian anti-strike provisions.

Wednesday's strike is a symptom of growing opposition among university workers—and students—to the agenda of the Rudd Labor government. After decades of under-funding and user-pays, Labor's "education revolution" is ushering in even deeper attacks, posing the need for a genuine socialist alternative for students and the entire working class.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact