

SEP candidate speaks at academics' union forum

A revealing political line-up in Australian election campaign

Oliver Campbell
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A National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) forum in Sydney last Thursday provided a foretaste of the joint efforts that will be made by the Labor Party, unions, Greens and pseudo “left” groups to suppress all discussion of the two most critical issues in the August 21 federal election and to channel unprecedented popular disaffection with the official political establishment back into the safe channels of the Labor Party.

Not one of the invited speakers from these organisations made mention of the global economic crisis or last month’s backroom corporate-backed coup that installed Julia Gillard as prime minister.

Billed as a discussion on “The Future of Higher Education Beyond the 2010 Federal Election”, the forum brought together representatives of the NTEU, Greens and Socialist Alliance with Labor senator and former trade union leader Doug Cameron in a display of intimate unity, with each speaker effusively thanking Cameron for attending, and appealing for a closer relationship.

Opening the forum, NTEU New South Wales state secretary Genevieve Kelly claimed that Labor had reversed the “appalling” higher education under-funding of the Howard government and ended its “Work Choices” industrial relations agenda. This set the scene for the rest of the evening, with all the official speakers invoking the ghost of the Howard government to justify their support for the Gillard government and its pro-market restructuring of tertiary education.

Kelly made mild complaints about the Labor government’s continuing low funding levels and new “performance-based” funding “compacts”, but reiterated the union’s support for the basic thrust of the “education revolution” that Gillard launched as education and workplace relations minister. Under Gillard’s plan, universities will be funded according to the number of students they enrol each year, forcing them to compete to attract students to the most profitable courses, which are likely to be those most demonstrably oriented to the latest employment requirements of big business.

Senator Cameron endorsed every aspect of the plan, and

explicitly backed Gillard’s proposed MyUniversity web site. This site will parallel the new prime minister’s already established MySchools web site, which is designed to encourage parents to remove their children from supposedly “poorly performing” public schools. Echoing Gillard, he insisted that education was “central to the economic agenda of the country”.

Cameron ominously declared that universities had to “change”. He informed academics that they had to accept, as *his* union members had done, the need to restructure their conditions in order to be “accountable” to taxpayers. Cameron was national secretary of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, which was central to the destruction of jobs, working conditions and rank-and-file union committees during the Hawke-Keating government of 1983-96, in the name of making Australian capitalism internationally competitive.

Greens Senate candidate Lee Rhiannon sought to appeal to the mounting concerns of academics over Gillard’s blueprint, expressing reservations about “mission-based funding compacts”. Nevertheless, she agreed with Cameron that universities had to be “accountable” to government. She made an open pitch for a Greens-Labor coalition, pledging that if the Greens held greater numbers in the Senate, their aim would be to help shape government policy.

Pip Hinman, the candidate for Grayndler of the so-called Socialist Alliance said the Rudd-Gillard government had made a “good start” in the field of tertiary education, but needed to “go further”. She made no criticism of the NTEU’s support for the “education revolution” and its role in pushing through enterprise agreements at individual universities, designed to help them compete in the new education marketplace by introducing new fixed-term contracts (see “Australia: Academics’ union makes key concessions at University of Western Sydney”).

Underscoring the social orientation of the ex-left groups, Hinman told the audience that it was “good to hear” Cameron say that he stood for “stronger unions”. The word socialism did not pass her lips.

Mike Head, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for the western Sydney electorate of Fowler, and a lecturer at the University of Western Sydney (UWS), was refused the right to speak from the platform, and allowed only three minutes from the floor. He was the only speaker to raise the real issues facing academics, students and the working class as a whole.

Head pointed out that no one had even mentioned the worst breakdown of global capitalism since the 1930s or the resulting political shock in Australia—the coup carried out by a small group of Labor Party factional bosses against Prime Minister Rudd.

“For all the elaborate facade of parliamentary democracy and national elections, behind the backs of the population, an elected prime minister was deposed within the space of 24 hours, without any objection by any Labor MP, including Doug Cameron.

“Julia Gillard was installed at the direct behest of the major mining companies and finance capital. Her total capitulation to the multinational mining giants on the profits tax makes clear where political power really lies.”

Head said it was also increasingly apparent that the Obama administration had become concerned that Rudd was wavering in his support for the crisis-wracked US-led occupation of Afghanistan. Gillard had since repudiated Defence Minister John Faulkner’s June 23 announcement that the Labor government would consider withdrawing Australian troops from Afghanistan within two to four years.

As Head outlined the possible relationship between Washington and the Gillard coup, Cameron became noticeably agitated, gesturing and whispering to Kelly, who chaired the meeting.

Head went on to emphasise the implications of Gillard’s “education revolution”. “It is bringing all the catastrophes of the capitalist market—such as the global financial crisis, the BP oil spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico and the collapse of ABC Learning child care centres—to every level of education, including higher education.

“Last year, without any democratic consultation with its members, the NTEU praised Gillard when she announced her new university funding blueprint, even though it amounts to a virtual voucher system, with money allocated on the basis of where students choose to go.

“When the previous Howard government twice attempted similar measures, under ministers David Kemp and Brendan Nelson, it was forced to retreat in the face of outspoken opposition by university staff and students.

“Yet, speakers on the platform here have claimed that Gillard is a “lesser evil” than Abbott. The reality is that Gillard has introduced a scheme that goes far beyond the Liberals’ wildest dreams.”

Head said that under Labor’s scheme, many universities would

try to offset chronic under-funding by enrolling thousands more students in high-demand courses. Because of the volatile character of student numbers, often reflecting the shifting requirements of business, universities would seek greater use of short-term teaching contracts, as well as heavier workloads for academics.

The SEP candidate said that was precisely what was happening at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), which had “over-enrolled” by 17 percent this year—taking in more students than it was currently funded for, in order to secure market share. Referring to the ongoing industrial dispute at UNSW, Head said that the management’s demand for unlimited fixed-term contracts was not the product of an individual vice-chancellor, Fred Hilmer, as other speakers had claimed, but of Gillard’s free market agenda.

Amid repeated efforts by Kelly to cut off his contribution, Head urged university staff and students to fight for a socialist program. “The SEP’s policy is that quality, free public education must be provided for all young people, from kindergarten to university, as well as technical training. Student fees must be abolished, including for overseas students, and the loan debt cancelled.

“That will never be achieved outside of the working class taking power out of the hands of the wealthy elite and their lackeys in parliament, and completely reorganising economic and social life along socialist lines.”

Head’s brief remarks won applause from the audience, but none of the speakers discussed the issues he raised. Instead, Socialist Alliance supporters in the audience made obsequious appeals to Cameron to voice their concerns in the Labor caucus.

A member of the audience asked the speakers to comment on Labor’s “Fair Work” industrial laws, which the UNSW management was provocatively using to stand down academics who had imposed work bans on processing student results. In their answers, Cameron and the other official speakers evaded the question entirely, repeating the lie that Labor’s laws were an improvement on Howard’s “Work Choices”.

Members of the audience called for the SEP candidate to answer the question, but Kelly, rattled by Head’s earlier remarks and fearful of further exposure of the Labor Party, gave the floor to a member of the Socialist Alliance, who repeated the call for Cameron to “listen to their concerns”. Cameron cynically assured the SA member that he would, whereupon Kelly closed the meeting.

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