

SEP candidate addresses student rally at University of New South Wales

“This fight is first and foremost a political struggle against the Gillard government”

Oliver Campbell
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Zac Hambides, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for Kingsford-Smith and president of the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) at Sydney's University of New South Wales (UNSW), advanced the need for a political struggle against the Gillard Labor government and for a socialist perspective to defend education at a demonstration of students on Tuesday.

The rally was called in support of 70 staff who have been stood down by the administration for imposing work bans as part of an ongoing dispute over working conditions. Against the efforts of other speakers to cover up the decisive political issues at stake, Hambides explained that the university's actions flowed directly from two central policies of the Labor government—its “education revolution” and its anti-strike laws.

The rally organisers, the UNSW Student Representative Council (SRC) leadership, had refused to include Hambides on the official speakers' list on the grounds that it would be “impolite” to the speakers it had already invited from the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), the Greens and the pseudo-left tendency Socialist Alliance. SRC president Osman Faruqi only grudgingly allowed Hambides to speak after ISSE members and supporters began distributing a letter of protest among the assembled staff and students. (See: “ISSE Open Letter to UNSW SRC”)

The dispute at UNSW goes to the heart of the Labor government's agenda. In order to create the staffing flexibility required to push through the next stage of the government's free-market deregulation of education, UNSW Vice Chancellor Fred Hilmer has insisted on the unchecked right to determine the levels of casual, part-time and permanent staff. Academics have opposed this demand, as it would leave them with no employment security.

In standing down the staff members, the administration has made use of the repressive powers granted to employers by the Labor government under its Fair Work Australia legislation. Labor, with the agreement of the trade unions, including the NTEU, has made most industrial action illegal. Even when workers do take legally protected action, as at UNSW, employers are entitled under Labor's laws to stand them down or lock them out.

The treatment of the academic staff has provoked significant opposition among students, hundreds of whom have joined Facebook groups such as “UNSW Law Students Support Our Lecturers” and “UNSW Arts and Social Science Faculty Students Support Their Lecturers”. The actions of the NTEU and the SRC, however, have been consciously aimed at blocking any discussion of Labor's education agenda and industrial laws, and the union's role in endorsing them. They have sought to portray the conflict as simply a product of Vice Chancellor Hilmer's refusal to negotiate.

Addressing the crowd of about 160 students and staff on Tuesday, Susan Price, president of the university's NTEU branch and a leading member of Socialist Alliance, did not mention the Labor Party or Fair Work Australia. She also kept silent on the political coup against former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, which led to Gillard's installation as prime minister.

Gillard, as Rudd's education and workplace minister, was the architect of both the Fair Work legislation and Labor's “education revolution”. She was responsible for introducing the new arrangements into universities that directly tie their funding to the number of enrolments, which can vary significantly from one year to the next. Since the ousting of Rudd, Gillard has made clear that extending Labor's free-market restructuring to every level of the education system will be a centrepiece of her government's program.

Price, in a cynical and dishonest fashion, implied that the UNSW staff stand-downs were a consequence of the former Liberal-National Party coalition government's Work Choices legislation, which Labor's Fair Work Australia has replaced. She told the audience: “The Vice Chancellor at UNSW is the only vice chancellor in the country who wants to hold on to Work Choices.”

Price also attempted to obscure the fact that staff at Victoria University in Melbourne were engaged in an almost identical struggle against casualisation as that taking place at UNSW. She declared that at “other universities” the issues confronting academic staff had been “resolved” through bargaining. The problem at UNSW, she declared, was Hilmer.

Greens NSW state parliamentarian John Kaye spoke briefly about

his “commitment” to education, and his opposition to Hilmer and “managerialism”. He, too, made no reference to the Labor government’s industrial relations regime or its education policies, both of which are supported by the Greens.

The reduction of the issues at UNSW to the management style of the vice chancellor generated opposition. One law professor told the rally: “There is a key political battle going on here for the future of higher education in this country... This is not just a dispute about this particular enterprise bargaining agreement... Both of the major parties in the election have a perspective which is not fundamentally different to that which has operated since the 1980s, and that is to introduce the market into education.”

Hambides was the final speaker. Against the attempts of the NTEU, the Greens and the Socialist Alliance to cover up Labor’s assault on education and the working class as a whole, the SEP candidate spelt out the political implications of the UNSW dispute.

Hambides told the audience: “The ISSE and Socialist Equality Party supports the actions taken by lecturers and teachers and demands all be reinstated immediately and paid in full for the time they were stood down... But this fight is first and foremost a political struggle against the Gillard government.

“We confront the combined impact of two major policies of the Labor government, the ‘education revolution’ and Fair Work Australia legislation—both of which were personally overseen by Gillard before she was installed as prime minister in the backroom political coup that ousted Rudd.

“Under Labor’s ‘education revolution”, UNSW, like all universities, is forced to be responsive to fluctuations in the market due to chronic underfunding dating back to the Hawke-Keating Labor government from 1983 to 1996, which first brought in student fees. This year, UNSW has over-enrolled by 17 percent to ensure a greater share of the student market.”

The SEP candidate stressed that the dispute over working conditions was not the result of the personality of Vice Chancellor Hilmer, but rather his role in seeking to implement Labor’s policies. (See: “The political issues in the University of NSW work bans dispute”)

Exposing the position of the initial speakers, Hambides said: “In the 2007 federal elections, teachers and students were told ad nauseam that the Labor Party would be a ‘lesser evil’ to the Liberal Party by Socialist Alternative, Socialist Alliance and the Greens. These forces are again bringing forward this argument in the 2010 federal elections. But the policies of the next government, whether Labor or Liberal, will be determined by the deepest global capitalist crisis since the Great Depression. This breakdown is seeing the biggest spending cuts in Germany, the United States and the United Kingdom since the 1930s.”

Referring to NTEU president Price’s comments about the possibility of a deal being struck between the union leadership and the university management, Hambides pointed to an agreement carried through by the NTEU at the University of Western Sydney earlier this year. The NTEU made major concessions, including accepting new

short-term contracts.

Hambides warned UNSW staff that “any deal carried through by the union leadership will represent a betrayal, and a setback for teachers...We’ve seen it time and time again...This is the logic of the union’s support for the ‘education revolution’ and the Labor government’s agenda of transforming education into another market.”

Amid repeated attempts by SRC president Faruqi to cut off his remarks, Hambides called on students and teachers to launch a political struggle against the Gillard government:

“This election will be no more ‘democratic’ than the removal of Rudd. Therefore the Socialist Equality Party and the International Students for Social Equality calls on students and teachers to break from the Labor Party and its apologists and form rank-and-file-committees to organise a broad movement on the basis of the socialist and internationalist perspective advanced by the SEP alone. We urge students to read the *World Socialist Web Site* and take up the fight for socialism.”

Faruqi, anxious to disassociate himself from any opposition to the Labor Party or the NTEU, took the microphone and told the crowd that Hambides’ statements were “not constructive”. In response to the exposure of the role of the unions as a mechanism for implementing Labor’s policies, representatives of Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance also spoke again. Pip Hinman, the Socialist Alliance candidate for the seat of Grayndler, stressed her organisation’s unconditional support for the NTEU, despite its history of sell-outs of the interests of tertiary education workers.

The union held a meeting of its members after the rally. According to a NTEU official, the union has offered to lift work bans until the end of September in exchange for “intensive negotiations”. The clear intent of any such agreement would be to prevent any industrial action until after the August 21 election, in order help Labor retain office.

Click here for full coverage of the SEP 2010 election campaign
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