

Australia: SEP member exposes role of Greens and unions at Macquarie University rally

Our reporters
11 January 2011

Socialist Equality Party member Carolyn Kennett spoke of the need for a political struggle against the Gillard Labor government and for a socialist perspective to defend education at a stop work rally at Macquarie University on January 5. Her address to fellow-academics appears in full below.

Against the efforts of other speakers to cover up the role of the Labor government, Kennett explained that the crisis facing staff at all universities was a direct result of Labor's pro-market agenda for higher education—its "education revolution", which subordinates every aspect of the education system to the demands of the corporate elite.

The rally was organised by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) as part of its campaign for an enterprise agreement at Macquarie University. The actions of the NTEU have been consciously aimed at blocking any discussion of Labor's "education revolution" and regressive industrial laws, and of the union's role in enforcing them.

Cathy Rytmeister, NTEU branch president at Macquarie, only grudgingly allowed Kennett to speak after she was told that it had been agreed at a members' meeting held the previous day—a meeting that most of the branch executive had not attended.

Other speakers at the rally were John Kaye, a Greens member of the New South Wales (NSW) Legislative Council, Sally McManus, vice president of Unions NSW and secretary of the NSW branch of the Australian Services Union (ASU), and Genevieve Kelly, NSW division secretary of the NTEU.

Kaye and the union speakers made clear their de facto support for Labor's education agenda. They laid the blame for the assault on the tertiary sector at the door of the previous Liberal government and on individual vice chancellors. They also attempted to divert attention from the role of both the Labor Party and the Greens in implementing policies that have long been sought by right-wing think tanks and corporate interests.

Kaye, Kelly, McManus and Rytmeister all blamed WorkChoices—the former Howard government's industrial relations laws—for the assault on university workers, with Kaye claiming that a win in enterprise bargaining would "kill off one of the worst remaining vestiges of WorkChoices". Kelly castigated the vice chancellors of the University of NSW (UNSW) and Macquarie for "hanging onto their WorkChoices prerogatives even though the legislation has changed".

At the end of last year, dozens of staff at both universities were stood down without pay after they imposed bans on the processing of student examination results. Labor's industrial laws permit such standdowns and other forms of employer retaliation.

In her address at the rally, Kennett opposed the whitewashing of Labor's role by the NTEU and the Greens. According to McManus, casualisation across the sector's workforce was the result of the Howard government. But it was the trade unions and the Hawke-Keating Labor governments that paved the way for the huge numbers of workers in casual and insecure jobs via the Prices and Incomes Accord and the "Australia Reconstructed" program in the 1980s and 1990s.

Kaye demonstrated the Greens' support for a negotiated "settlement" i.e., the suppression of any independent struggle by staff and students, saying "this issue could come to an end tomorrow if Schwartz [the vice chancellor] agreed to negotiate."

Revealingly, Rytmeister sought to disrupt Kennett's speech when she began to outline the role of the Greens in pushing through a series of pro-market reforms—including thousands of job cuts—while in office in Tasmania during the 1990s. Rytmeister attempted to cut Kennett off, turning the speaker-system away from the audience and interjecting. It was an extraordinary demonstration of the increasingly close relationship that has developed between the unions and the Greens.

My name is Carolyn Kennett and I was the Socialist Equality Party's candidate in the seat of Reid for the 2010 federal election. I am a member of the mathematics department at Macquarie.

The past three and a half years have seen Labor implement policies across the education sector long advocated by the Liberal party and right-wing think tanks. Julia Gillard has been at the forefront of these policies.

Look at Gillard's record. It is why she was installed as prime minister, backed by business, in June last year. Labor's education revolution has nothing to do with improving education; it's about subjecting every aspect of education to the immediate profit requirements of big business, across schools, TAFEs and universities.

The purpose of the education reforms in universities is not to increase participation for equity reasons, as the Labor government has claimed, but is aimed at the further privatisation of the sector. Universities are being

forced to compete for students, courses will be tailored to meet the narrow vocational needs of Australian businesses, and whole areas of study will wither and die.

Gillard's program represents an escalation of the processes that began with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments from 1983 to 1996. Universities have been increasingly starved of public funding, and domestic and international students have been forced to pay exorbitant fees. Billions of dollars have been extracted from international students through fees each year, making the international student "market" currently Australia's fourth-highest export earner.

The inevitable consequence of subordinating universities to the dictates of the global capitalist market is ongoing financial volatility, and the consequent destruction of job security. The growing use of casuals and fixed-term contracts has profound implications for security of tenure and academic freedom, which are essential to fight the mounting commercialisation of universities and the tailoring of every aspect of teaching and research to the requirements of business and government.

These processes will only worsen under the sweeping changes to university funding—the introduction by Labor of what is essentially a student voucher system. From 2012, domestic undergraduate student places will be completely de-regulated and universities will be funded only for the number of students they enrol each year. In positioning themselves for this new regime, many universities have substantially increased their enrolments in high-demand courses, while cutting those that do not attract a profitable number of students.

The cuts in the Faculty of Science at Macquarie are part of this wider funding crisis throughout the tertiary education sector and are an inevitable outcome of this market approach to education, which forces universities to compete with each other for enrolments in the most money-making courses, tailor their teaching programs to the needs of employers and seek alternative sources of revenue, including from international student fees.

The industrial disputes at both Macquarie and UNSW arise directly from the Labor government's "education revolution". The universities are demanding unlimited use of casuals, short-term contracts and part-time staff in order to gain the "flexibility" they need to operate in the new market-driven funding regime currently being introduced by the government.

Even though the cuts flow directly from the Gillard government's free market agenda, the NTEU is keeping its members straitjacketed within the narrow framework of bargaining for new enterprise agreements at UNSW and Macquarie. Both university managements are adamant that they must retain full discretion to determine levels of non-permanent staff.

In the 2007 election, the ACTU [Australian Council of Trade Unions] backed by teacher unions and the NTEU called for a Labor vote to stop the Liberals' hated WorkChoices legislation. But what was the outcome? Labor's Fair Work Australia laws have been used against section after section of workers, including teachers and academics.

The standing down of staff under these laws highlights their repressive nature. As does the Fair Work tribunal's ability to order workers to halt industrial action if it is threatening to cause "significant harm" to any part of the economy, or "endangering the safety, health or welfare" of any segment of the population.

In a message to members, however, NTEU National Secretary Grahame McCulloch blamed the former Howard government's WorkChoices laws for the standoff in bargaining, obscuring the fact that Labor's laws have retained and even strengthened the anti-strike provisions. McCulloch said nothing about Labor's pro-market "education revolution" that is driving declining working conditions at all universities.

As unions have done for decades, the NTEU used the tribunal hearing as a lever to move to terminate the industrial action. The union agreed to a timetable for releasing results for some categories of students, including graduating students and students who had failed some courses. The NTEU admitted that this had eroded the effectiveness of the bans. In essence, the union had enforced the Labor government's anti-strike legislation.

Despite efforts by the NTEU and other unions to portray Labor's Fair Work Act as fairer than the WorkChoices legislation, academics are being confronted with the reality that their basic rights, as well as jobs and working conditions, are under direct threat from the Gillard government.

At Macquarie, and all other universities, the NTEU has politically backed the Labor government, and opposed any unified struggle against its funding "revolution". Instead, during the past year, the union has diverted its members into isolated industrial action at individual universities over enterprise bargaining agreements. These agreements have been designed, essentially, to deliver to each university management, in return for marginal pay rises, greater flexibility to use short-term employment contracts to allow for the anticipated sharp fluctuations in student numbers and government funding. The truth is that Gillard is reliant on the unions to ram through the government's agenda.

The NTEU has portrayed the issue as one of bad management practices. Pointing to Macquarie's \$61 million operating surplus, the union has advanced a series of dead-end proposals, including lobbying university management to rethink the allocation of funds to the faculties. In reality, the funding crisis at Macquarie is the end product of the subordination of all universities to a financial and corporate agenda. A substantial operating surplus may mean little in the face of falling fee revenue and the drying up of private equity investment. In reality, university managements are simply enforcing the Labor government's agenda.

Just as in the Hawke-Keating years when the unions played a vital role in implementing and enforcing the various Accords and "Australia Reconstructed", the reforms in education by Labor could not have been carried through without the teacher unions and the NTEU. They have acted to isolate teachers and academics and suppress opposition to the government's agenda.

It is time to face facts. Labor's agenda is the subordination of education to the dictates of the market; it can only be defeated by a movement that directly challenges the capitalist free market system. The SEP believes that education is a basic right. An education system should develop the all-round capacities of young people, including creative and critical thinking skills. It should develop young people into well-informed and well-rounded citizens capable of critically analysing arguments and making informed decisions.

This is precisely what Labor's reforms aim to suppress. In opposition to Labor's agenda that promotes the ongoing privatisation of education at all levels, the SEP advances a socialist program. Universities must be fully funded public institutions, freely available to all, and run in the interests of the full intellectual and cultural development of students and staff. Student fees, both domestic and international, must be abolished. Student loans

and “HECS” debts must be cancelled. These measures cannot be implemented through parliament, which cannot be reformed or pressured, but require an independent political struggle by the working class.

The Greens have been promoted by the unions as a progressive alternative to the major parties. Indeed this is one of the reasons that John Kaye was invited to speak here today. They are nothing of the sort. They are a capitalist party, hostile to the needs of workers. Just look at their record. In 1990, the Greens were in a coalition government in Tasmania that brought about massive cuts to public spending. More than 2,000 workers from the public service were laid off, regressive taxes were imposed and TAFE fees were increased, amongst other measures.

In October 2008, Greens deputy leader Christine Milne said of this period: “It was a difficult period of protests and unrest as the public service was slashed and public spending was cut. The Greens never wavered from the task.” In tertiary education, Greens Senator Sarah Hansen Young is on record as saying that the Greens welcomed the government’s reform agenda in universities. Last year’s motion in the NSW upper house highlights the reality that the Greens are also trying to block the development of a genuine struggle in defense of public education, in line with the NTEU, in portraying the struggles at Macquarie and UNSW as a problem of individual rogue managements.

Around the world, public education at all levels is under a severe assault in the wake of the global financial crisis, with students and teachers engaged in decisive battles with governments across Europe and America over funding cuts, fee hikes and job losses. Similar attacks are now emerging in Australia. They will only deepen as the international economic situation deteriorates.

At Macquarie and elsewhere a political struggle must be taken up against the NTEU and the Labor government’s pro-business agenda. The struggle must tackle the problem at its root—the profit system— which subordinates every aspect of education, as well as social and cultural life, to the dictates of the market.

Staff and students need to organise city-wide mass meetings across all university campuses—independent of the NTEU—to discuss and develop a unified industrial and political campaign against the Labor government’s agenda. Such a fight requires a socialist perspective.

As a first step, in order to defeat the Macquarie and UNSW attacks, university workers—both academic and general—must take matters out of the hands of the NTEU and call mass meetings of staff and students to plan an industrial and political campaign against Labor’s program. A determined stand by university staff and students would win powerful support throughout the working class, in Australia and internationally.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact