

# Australia: Unions prepare to sell out Sydney university workers

An IYSSE reporting team  
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On March 7, staff at the University of Sydney carried out a 24-hour strike in opposition to a raft of attacks on conditions being demanded by the university's management. The unions, however, are already indicating to management that they will help impose its demands as long as their role as bargaining agents continues.

The strike was called by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which covers university staff, after closed-door negotiations over a new workplace agreement broke down. Members of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) also went on strike.

Staff manned picket lines at each entrance of the university, though few academics were present, reportedly due to fears of being victimised by management. While some classes appear to have gone ahead, communications staff shut down the university's phone lines and internet services.

University management is demanding an end to restrictions on casual employment, a dramatic reduction in annual sick days, removal of restrictions on work hours, and the abolition of provisions protecting intellectual freedom, including the right of staff to criticise management and its policies. It is also seeking to remove the unions as bargaining agents for the staff.

The assault is part of the federal Labor government's "education revolution", which is aimed at corporatising higher education institutions and forcing them into ever more ferocious competition for research funding and student numbers. At universities around the country, academics and staff have been sacked, class sizes increased and working conditions undermined.

The University of Sydney carried out a spate of sackings last year. At the beginning of 2012, management announced that it would cut 340 jobs. The

NTEU worked to dissipate opposition to the proposed sackings, claiming they were a result of an incorrect allocation of resources and "budgeting errors". The union struck a deal with management to axe at least 55 jobs and force another 100 academics into teaching-only positions—hailing this as a "victory". According to the CPSU, a significant number of general staff positions have also been eliminated.

University workers who spoke with an International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) reporting team were primarily concerned over the impact of the new attacks on their jobs and conditions.

The NTEU's aim, however, is to convince university management to continue to use the union's services to help impose the Gillard government's restructuring measures. President of the University of Sydney NTEU branch, Michael Thomson, complained to the media that "the unions wouldn't be party to the agreement" and that "a lot of the consultation that occurs at the moment wouldn't occur". The unions, he said "wouldn't have rights to be involved in essentially review committees".

The focal point of the strike, a demonstration on the main campus, was a cynical display of the NTEU's determination to block any political struggle against the Labor government and channel the anger of staff into a campaign aimed solely at preserving the union's status as the chief agency for imposing management dictates.

NTEU national assistant secretary Matthew McGowan absurdly claimed that the university's vice-chancellor, Michael Spence, was attempting to push through attacks on conditions because the conservative Liberal and National Coalition opposition parties might win the September 14 federal election. He made no mention of the far-reaching assault on jobs and conditions already being carried out by the minority

Labor government, with the complicity of the Greens.

The NTEU invited Labor Senator Doug Cameron—a member of the very government implementing the attacks—and Greens’ senator Lee Rhiannon to address the rally. Its decision to give them a platform was a signal to management that the union would continue to collaborate with cuts to the conditions of its members, providing its position was preserved.

In an insult to university workers, Cameron declared that their “wages, conditions, and career prospects” were only “short term issues” and that the major question in the strike was management’s “attack on trade unionism”. He concluded his demagogic speech by imploring staff members to join the union.

The Greens’ Lee Rhiannon was allowed to posture unchallenged as a defender of both education and workers’ rights, stating that “we live in a country now where successive federal and state governments have made it so hard to strike.” In reality, the Greens have passed every Labor budget attacking education and made no challenge to its Fair Work Australia industrial legislation that bans virtually all industrial action.

The various pseudo-left organisations which dominate the so-called “rank-and-file” Education Action Group at the University of Sydney—including Socialist Alternative, Socialist Alliance, and Solidarity—lined up completely with the NTEU.

Following Cameron and Rhiannon, Alma Torlakovic was introduced by the NTEU as a staff member who would give a “rank and file” perspective. Torlakovic, a writer for the Socialist Alternative website/magazine did not mention her political affiliation, or criticise Labor, the Greens, or the union. Members of Solidarity who addressed an informal “speak out” following the main demonstration, once again promoted the NTEU’s “campaign” last year, which culminated in over 50 job cuts, as a “victory”.

The strike at the University of Sydney underscores again that any fight against the assault on education and the rights of education workers will require a rebellion against the NTEU and CPSU, and their pseudo-left satellites. Genuine rank-and-file committees should be established and a turn made to the staff and students across all education institutions as well as to sections of workers facing similar attacks. In opposition to the austerity agenda being led by the Gillard Labor government, a political fight must be waged for a

workers’ government and a socialist perspective to reorganise society for the benefit of all, not just the wealthy elite. All young people should have the basic social right to free, high-quality education.

Striking workers who spoke to the IYSSE voiced their concerns about the situation they confront.

A general staff member in the health sciences department commented: “We’ve seen a marked reduction in the number of academics, and we can see the writing on the wall for ourselves because they are trying to streamline a lot of procedures. The consequence is that people who are left behind are doing more work.

“As general staff, we are required to take on additional duties to accommodate the people who have been made redundant. We had two rounds of redundancies in our faculty, we’ve lost a lot of talented people in our faculty. Some of them were voluntary, some weren’t. Around two years ago, we lost a number of general staff—but the vice chancellor has made it clear that there are more to go.

“I can see that we are making education a business the way they’re making transport and communication a business. Everything’s being sold off and they’re making money from it.”

James, a laboratory technician, said: “Staff cuts have affected me. I used to work in a team of four, now there are three of us. We had six permanent academics, now we only have three. We’re under the pump. Student experience is affected—they don’t get the academic support that they need because there isn’t time to do it. They want to push the casualisation of the workforce as much as possible. If you’re casual, you don’t get paid as much, you don’t have entitlements, or rights. Everything around here is to save cash.”



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