

Australia: Sydney University staff strike over jobs and conditions

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The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) staged a 48-hour strike by University of Sydney staff last week to divert the mounting discontent among staff and students over the results of the Gillard government's "education revolution"—soaring class sizes, workloads, job cuts and casualisation of employment. The strike followed a one-day stoppage on March 7.

While criticising the university for the deepening attacks on the conditions of academics and other university workers, NTEU officials sent clear signals that they were seeking a deal with the management, as they did last year when the union signed an agreement with the university, slashing more than 50 jobs.

The strikes were called in response to the breakdown of enterprise bargaining negotiations with the university administration. As on March 7, staff manned picket lines at entrances to the university. According to the union, attendance in university libraries was down at least 50 percent, indicating that a high proportion of staff joined the strike.

One prominent feature of the strike was the presence of a large number of police, including around a dozen riot police, who were stationed on campus each day, from early morning. In the past, universities traditionally have been free of police intervention. Police provocatively jostled and pushed picketers and arrested five protesters. Riot police effectively "locked down" areas of the campus.

The aggressive police response is a sharp warning that under conditions of mounting hostility to the attacks on education, and the emergence of broader social and class struggles, governments will increasingly mobilise the forces of the state against opposition and protests by workers and students.

Along with other universities across the country, the

University of Sydney is seeking to increase academic workloads, remove limitations on the casualisation of the workforce and impose other cuts to conditions, such as sick leave. In response to Labor's "education revolution," which ties university funding to enrolments, the universities have engaged in fierce competition with each other to win greater "market shares." They have rapidly expanded their student numbers, and demanded greater "flexibility" to axe jobs and casualise their workforces to deal with fluctuating enrolments.

The unions that cover university staff, the NTEU and the Community and Public Sector Union, support the Gillard government's agenda, which has increasingly subordinated higher education to the commercial and vocational requirements of the corporate and financial elite.

At a strike rally on March 26, NTEU Sydney University branch president Michael Thompson claimed that the attacks on staff conditions stemmed solely from the "bully tactics" of university management.

Thompson made no mention of the Gillard government. Instead, he absurdly claimed that the management had launched its attacks on conditions because it thought that Tony Abbott, the leader of the opposition Liberal Party, was "already running the country."

Other union bureaucrats, including NTEU national president Jeannie Rea, echoed Thompson's comments, indicating the union's determination to once more try to corral university workers behind the reelection of the Labor government.

As on March 7, the unions also provided Greens senator Lee Rhiannon with a platform to posture as a defender of education. In reality, the Greens are directly

responsible for the attacks on education, having provided crucial parliamentary support to the minority Labor government.

Since the two-day strike, the NTEU has produced a video featuring staff members appealing for the university management to “cooperate.” This appeal to the administration is a warning that the union is ready to help impose the management’s attacks on jobs and conditions, as it did last year.

The various pseudo-left tendencies, including Socialist Alliance, Socialist Alternative and Solidarity, have played a critical role in preventing staff and students from breaking out of the straightjacket of the unions.

In an article published on March 20, Solidarity, which is involved in the Education Action Group, described the series of one-day protests held last year, in the lead up to the NTEU’s deal with management to eliminate over 50 jobs, as an “inspiring campaign.”

Solidarity functions as little more than a mouthpiece of the unions. It featured an interview with NTEU branch president Thompson, who boasted that after the most recent one-day strike on March 7, “for the first time ever the university management engaged in bargaining and answered some of our queries.”

In other words, the NTEU, with the support of Solidarity and the other pseudo-left organisations, is again preparing to bargain away jobs and conditions in order to strike an enterprise bargaining agreement with the university, as the NTEU has been doing nationally for many years. As a result of these agreements, more than 60 percent of the university workforce nationally now consists of insecure casual academics and other staff.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality, the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party, warned that the unions were moving to sell out the university staff. IYSSE members explained to staff on the picket lines that their struggle raised the necessity to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, and take up a political struggle against the Labor government, on the basis of a socialist program to guarantee free high quality education and secure jobs for all workers.

An IYSSE reporting team spoke to strikers about the conditions and political issues they face.

Beatrice said: “I’m an academic in an ongoing

position. It’s not permanent. You never know when you’re going to go... I’ve seen the lack of opportunities, for those who recently finished their PhDs, to get a foothold at getting an academic career. I have had tutors who are single mothers who are really dependent on the income they get from the university, who don’t know what job they will have semester from semester, and they have kids to support.

“When you move from university to university you see that this has been happening across the education system. Students and staff are being put through this degree-producing factory. Where is the space for thinking and questioning?

“Obviously there are broader issues. I think we should be saying more here about why this university or that university is doing this. Whatever government is in power, you should hold them accountable.”



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