

# University union spends \$1 million to back Greens

Gabriela Zabala—SEP Senate candidate for Queensland  
27 July 2013

Having enforced the Labor government's market-driven "education revolution" over the past six years, at the expense of the jobs and conditions of its members, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is trying to cover its tracks.

Aware of the hostility of university staff and students to the Labor government's multi-billion dollar cuts to higher education over the past 12 months, the union has decided it cannot advocate a Labor vote in the 2013 election. Instead, it is backing the Greens, the very party that has propped up the minority Labor government since 2010. The NTEU announced in June that it will spend \$1 million to assist Greens candidates in the federal election campaign.

This shift is designed to hide the fact that, together with the Greens, the NTEU bears the central responsibility for Labor's imposition of \$2.8 billion worth of cuts announced in April, on top of those in 2011–12, when Labor slashed over \$1 billion from university research and other funding.

In 2007, the NTEU hailed the election of the Rudd government, claiming that it would deliver a new progressive era of higher education after 11 years of Liberal cutbacks and attacks on the rights of students and university workers. "NTEU congratulates the Australian Labor Party on winning the 2007 federal election," it stated.

"The union looks forward to working with the new Government to flesh out what the 'Education Revolution' means for universities." Labor's "recognition that universities have been significantly under funded over the last decade, and the commitment to reverse this situation, are significant."

In fact, Labor delivered chronic under-funding, ever-growing class sizes and workloads, and course closures and job cuts. Its "revolution," which was "fleshed out"

with the help of the NTEU, has forced universities to constantly compete with each other to cut costs, and attract larger enrolments, especially in business-oriented courses, just to survive financially.

From the outset, the NTEU pushed through enterprise agreements at individual universities, designed to give managements the "flexibility" they demanded in order to undercut their rivals. As a result, between 2007 and 2011, the proportion of casual employees rose further from 38.2 percent to 40.2 percent. Half of all university teaching nationally is now carried out by casuals, according to the union's own estimates.

During the 2010 election, the NTEU still promoted the illusion that Labor was a "lesser evil" compared to the Liberal-National Coalition. "The NTEU does not support the return of the Coalition to government," its magazine *Advocate* editorialised. Although it did not openly call for a Labor vote, the message was clear enough.

Now the NTEU has seemingly jumped ship from the Labor government, without any real explanation to its members, least of all any accounting for its own role in implementing Labor's regressive education policies.

The union is now attempting to falsify the historical record by portraying the Greens as opponents of Labor's protracted offensive. According to NTEU national president Jeannie Rea: "The Greens seem to be the only party to recognise that decades of chronic underfunding of Australian universities has led to ballooning class sizes, courses being discontinued, many thousands of secure jobs disappearing and has imperilled the quality of university education and research."

The Greens voted for every one of Labor's budgets. They have no significant differences with the underlying program of restructuring education to meet

the demands of the corporate elite. Moreover, many of the key NTEU officials who orchestrated the union's collaboration with Labor's measures are Greens themselves. They include NTEU national secretary Grahame McCulloch, who served on the Greens' national campaign committee, and Victorian NTEU secretary Colin Long, who stood for the Greens in the 2010 Victorian state election.

The union is now peddling a new lie: that a vote for the Greens in the Senate will shield higher education from deeper cuts, and also pressure Labor to change direction. NTEU president Rea stated: "We don't want to see the Labor government voted out and a Coalition government voted in but the ALP needs to hear loud and clear that the \$4 billion cuts to higher education since 2011 are plain dumb."

Rea condemned the cuts for "undermining this country's capacity to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century." This statement encapsulates the NTEU's commitment, shared by the Greens, as well as Labor, to meeting the demands of Australian big business for greater "productivity" and "competitiveness" in order to boost profits. Education is regarded as a commodity fashioned to meet corporate dictates, not as an all-rounded and critical enlightenment—a basic social right for all young people.

Labor cynically presented the latest university cuts as necessary to fund its "better schools" program. But the government's policies for schools and universities are determined by the same corporate agenda. The "better schools" program ties all school funding to regressive measures such as the constant ranking of schools by narrow NAPLAN numeracy and literacy testing, "performance pay" for teachers and greater powers to school principals to hire and fire teachers.

Far from fighting Labor's university cuts, in April the NTEU appealed to the university vice chancellors to slash infrastructure and capital works, instead of staff or student services, as a means of delivering the government's requirements without triggering massive resistance. In addition, the union is now rolling out a new set of enterprise agreements designed to facilitate the cuts, including by creating "teaching-only" positions. This new category, unprecedented in Australian universities, will lead to huge workloads, larger class sizes and greater job insecurity for young academics.

Already, Labor's latest cuts are generating a fresh wave of job-shedding. This month, the Australian National University announced it will axe 230 jobs, and the University of New South Wales is eliminating at least 35 in arts and social sciences. Further retrenchments will inevitably follow, regardless of the parties—Labor, Liberal or Greens—which form the next government.

At every point, the greatest cheerleaders of the NTEU's role have been the pseudo-left groups, such as Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative, which also insist that academics and students must support Labor as a "lesser evil." Their members have become well integrated into the NTEU leadership, participating in all its betrayals, reflecting the privileged upper middle class base of these organisations.

These pseudo-left groups are also covering up the fact that governments around the world, aided by the trade unions, are slashing education funding, along with all the other gains won in struggle by the working class.

Academics and other university staff, together with students, need to review these experiences, examine the NTEU's record and make a political assessment. The clear lesson is that it is impossible to defend public education without a fundamental break with the NTEU and all the establishment parties.

The Socialist Equality Party advocates the formation of rank-and-file committees of staff and students and a turn to other sections of workers in Australia and internationally facing a similar onslaught on jobs and conditions.

In its intervention into the 2013 election, the SEP is fighting for a unified struggle by the working class for a workers' government to implement a socialist program. That includes providing the tens of billions of dollars needed to establish free, high quality education, from kindergarten to university, as a basic social right.

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