

University of Sydney union conceals political issues in one-day strike

Our reporters

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The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) held a limited 24-hour stoppage and rally at the University of Sydney last week as part of its negotiations with university management for a new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA).

Just days later, the union struck a deal with the management that, by the NTEU bargaining team's own admission, "does not include any improvements in casual sick leave or casual superannuation or further improvements on the current redundancy provisions for academic staff." The deal also represents a pay cut in real terms for a majority of non-casual staff at the university.

The stoppage and rally highlighted how the NTEU exploits the EBA process, introduced by the Keating Labor government in 1993 with the support of all the trade unions. The union isolates tertiary education workers and students university-by-university, and helps enforce the ongoing transformation of universities into corporate entities serving the needs of the financial elite.

While NTEU members held token pickets at the university's main entrances, many classes went ahead, administrative units continued to function and students used university facilities throughout the day. The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), which covers some non-academic staff, had not balloted for strike action, so its members were required to be present for work.

At midday, the NTEU held a rally of about 300 staff and students outside the Fisher library, which remained open, before marching to the Chancellery. Throughout the rally, union officials and their supporters concealed the political issues confronting staff and falsely promoted the Labor Party and Greens as defenders of free education.

Chairing the rally, NTEU state secretary Michael Thomson made no mention of the Turnbull government's multi-billion dollar budget cuts. Nor did he speak about the attacks on staff and students at other universities,

except for a passing reference to a planned half-day stoppage at Western Sydney University this week. Staff members would have no idea from Thomson's remarks that a nationwide assault on education is underway, let alone that similar attacks are being carried out internationally.

Acting as a cheerleader for the trade union bureaucracy, April Holcombe, a member of the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative organisation and a Student Representative Council education officer, praised the NTEU for providing a "fantastic example to the working class across the whole country what you do when the Liberals are in power."

Holcombe kept silent on the historic cuts carried out by Labor—most recently the Greens-backed Gillard government cut \$2.3 billion from university funding in 2012–13. Socialist Alternative serves as a critical political prop for both Labor and the Greens.

Rachel Evans, a member of Socialist Alliance, another pseudo-left grouping, and a member of the Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association council, claimed: "If they won free education in Germany, Venezuela, Cuba, we can win it here."

Like Holcombe, Evans said nothing about the record of the Labor Party. It was the Hawke-Keating Labor government of 1983–96 which reintroduced international and domestic student tuition fees and established the current pro-market framework, in which tertiary education generated \$21.8 billion in revenue for Australian capitalism last year.

Mehreen Faruqi, a state Greens member of parliament, was handed the platform to claim, unchallenged, that "the Greens and I will never give up our fight for free higher education."

This is a fraud. The Greens provided the critical parliamentary prop for the Gillard government as it cut funding for universities. Before that, the Greens were at

the forefront of attempts to shut down 20 public schools in Tasmania in 2011. A state Greens education minister Nick McKim, now a federal Greens senator, said his party had to “take decisions that aren’t necessarily going to be popular.”

Even while posturing as a champion of free education, Faruqi promoted education spending from the standpoint of the interests of Australian business, saying it was “an investment in the long term.”

Speaking last, NTEU university branch president Kurt Iveson made a direct appeal to management to utilise the union’s services in its cost-cutting agenda. He repeatedly declared, “We are the university,” arguing that the NTEU only has the best interests of the university at heart. Iveson insisted that the union’s claims for “secure work, casual rights and salary are not unreasonable claims because we know it will make this place work better.”

In other words, the NTEU is more than willing to bargain away further jobs and conditions, as it has done in the past, to “make this place work better.” Iveson was also sending a message about the union’s ongoing collaboration in the university’s broader restructuring, via its *2016–20 Strategic Plan*, which seeks to further subordinate the university to the needs of employers and big business.

Last year, the union helped isolate an occupation of the Rozelle campus by Sydney College of the Arts (SCA) students, while negotiating with the university to shut the campus. At least another 130 staff lost their jobs in the Faculty of Science after restructuring in which the union was complicit.

Management held a snap poll last week, asking staff whether they wanted to vote on its latest “offer” to the union. In an email to all staff, Vice Chancellor Michael Spence threatened to halt enterprise bargaining until next year if a “no” vote was recorded. This suggested the possibility of terminating the EBA altogether, as Western Australia’s Murdoch University has done, in a bid to overturn conditions and cut pay.

According to Spence, only 39 percent of staff members voted, with 61 percent voting “no.” This indicates that academics and other university workers are determined to fight the ongoing assault. Some staff voted in favour only so they could see the agreement being negotiated, which neither the union nor management has released.

Now the union is trying to push through a very slightly “revised” offer by the management. Exactly as the *World Socialist Web Site* warned on September 1, the NTEU is rushing to use the Murdoch University decision in order

to organise retrograde agreements with individual universities.

These agreements will assist university managements to deliver the multi-billion dollar cuts to jobs, wages and basic conditions that Education Minister Simon Birmingham, the Turnbull government, and the corporate elites are demanding.

WSWS correspondents spoke to staff members at the rally.

Melanie commented: “I don’t agree with the policies that the university has put forward in terms of forced redundancies and decreasing the casual staff. I think it’s really impacting the quality of education. I think that management really needs to listen to the staff and students, and that’s what we’ve got here, staff and students.

“What’s happened at Murdoch University strengthens that idea of university as a corporation. Yes, university is big business, but it’s a different kind of business and profit shouldn’t be its first goal. Quality education should be... Anything not seen as lucrative in terms of productivity is not respected as it should be.”

Rosie said: “We have four principal demands. We’ve been offered a pay cut. They call it a pay rise but it’s not keeping up with inflation. Secondly, casuals are treated very badly in this university. They make up 50 percent of our teaching staff right now, but they don’t get any sick pay and they don’t get the same rate of super. The university wants to give people teaching-only roles in addition to the current staff loading, and that’s breaking the nexus between education and research, so the quality of education suffers. And the fourth issue is they could redeploy you, instead of making redundancies...”

“It’s really problematic that we’re not getting any support in education from any of our governments. We’re a very rich university and we have a vice chancellor who is paying himself \$1.4 million a year. I’m not concerned with the political parties at the moment; those parties are dead to me personally.”



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