

Australian university union blocks debate at WSU stopwork rally

Our correspondents
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A poorly-attended protest rally at Western Sydney University (WSU) last Thursday provided another display of the role of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU). Like other unions, it specialises in wearing down and stifling its members' opposition to increasingly regressive "enterprise" deals that it makes with university managements.

University workers, and workers everywhere, need to draw definite political lessons from their experiences. Above all, a rank and file rebellion against the corporatised trade unions must be developed, and an independent, unified political and industrial struggle initiated against budget-slashing, advanced preparations for war in the Asia-Pacific—which involve many of Australia's leading universities—and the abrogation of fundamental democratic rights.

WSU is one of the country's largest universities, with about 44,000 students and 3,500 staff. Thursday's rally at the Parramatta South campus, attended by barely 100 academics and staff, and no students, was even smaller than the one held at the Parramatta city campus during a similar four-hour NTEU work stoppage last month. The reduced participation reflected the utterly bankrupt perspective, advanced by the union, of appealing to WSU's vice-chancellor Barney Glover to treat staff better.

Due to deep government cuts, the rights of WSU workers and students, like those of their counterparts across the country, are under a major assault. Another estimated 150 jobs are being eliminated, on top of about 250 job losses last year. Administrative staff members are currently being forced to compete against each other for their jobs, often at lower pay. The entire permanent security officer workforce of 41 is being sacked and replaced by contract labour. Academics and students are being forced to accommodate to massive class sizes, huge workloads and ever-greater use of insecure and heavily-

exploited casual teachers.

The main thrust of the union rally was to ask NTEU members to write individual messages to Glover, urging him to be more empathetic and to see the wisdom of reaching a "good" enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) with the NTEU, for the benefit of the university's image and reputation.

The NTEU's national model for a "good" EBA is the sellout deal pushed through a bitter membership meeting at the University of Sydney last month. That agreement permits hundreds of forced redundancies via sweeping restructuring plans. It also abandons claims for improved basic conditions for casual staff, allows the creation of 120 teaching-only roles, with heavy workloads, and provides for 2.1 percent annual wage increases—a real pay cut.

Although the Liberal-National Coalition government's latest bill to gouge another \$2.8 billion in cuts out of the universities stalled in the Senate this week, the government vowed to impose the cutbacks by other means. But universities are already inflicting the cost-cutting. Managements are working closely with the NTEU and the other main campus union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), to impose the required measures, at the expense of jobs and decent conditions for both staff and students.

On Thursday, as at last month's WSU rally, NTEU officials prevented any genuine discussion or debate. Once again, they refused to allow Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporters to move an opposed resolution. The blocked SEP motion read:

"That this meeting opposes the NTEU sell-out at the University of Sydney and calls for a unified fight by university workers nationally against the Liberal-National government's cuts, and to overturn all the previous cuts imposed by both Labor and Coalition governments over the past four decades. We demand that billions of dollars

be poured into education at all levels, from pre-school to tertiary, to guarantee the social right of all young people to a free, first-class education and the social right of all staff to decent, well-paid and secure positions.”

While preventing debate on that resolution, NTEU WSU branch president David Burchell claimed that the ongoing “restructuring” at the university was occurring because “the folks who run this place don’t have a clue.” According to Burchell, the management “don’t seem to be aware” of the consequences of their measures. Later, he said he hoped the rally’s messages would cause Glover to engage in “quiet reflection” on the need to negotiate better with the NTEU.

This set the tone for the proceedings. Not a single NTEU representative referred to the Turnbull government’s cuts, let alone the previous \$3 billion in cutbacks imposed by the last Greens-backed Labor government. No-one mentioned the Rudd-Gillard Labor government’s “education revolution,” imposed with the full backing of the NTEU, which has compelled universities to compete with each other for financial survival by slashing costs, while enrolling as many high-fee paying students as possible.

Their silence on these issues serves only to cover-up the real source of the attacks on public education, which lie in the enforcement by successive governments, Labor and Coalition alike, of the dictates of the financial markets and major corporations. Unsurprisingly, the NTEU is urging its members to support the return of yet another pro-business Labor government.

NTEU national president Jeannie Rea criticised the Turnbull government for introducing reactionary industrial laws, but said nothing about the trade union movement’s backing of the “enterprise bargaining” system. This is because it was imposed by the Keating Labor government in the 1990s, while the further anti-strike Fair Work Australia laws were imposed by Rudd and Gillard in the Labor government of 2007-2010.

New South Wales state NTEU secretary Michael Thomson read a letter from NTEU national secretary Grahame McCulloch, reinforcing the union’s main message. McCulloch called for “productive bargaining” to clinch EBAs like the ones struck at the University of Sydney and seven other universities. Thomson himself hailed the proposed University of Sydney EBA as a “good agreement.”

The truth is that NTEU EBAs have been the vehicle for facilitating all the government-employer attacks. In its emails urging staff members to attend the rally, the NTEU

listed, as one of the current EBA sticking points, management’s refusal to “restore Teaching Focussed Roles [TFRs] and Career Development Fellowships, which have a proven track-record of stemming casualisation.”

This is a lie. The NTEU’s own statistics show that since the TFRs were introduced, as part of a previous EBA in 2012, casual employment at WSU has increased from 25 percent to 35 percent of the workforce. Other data shows that 57 percent of WSU employees are now in insecure work. At the same time, academics in TFRs are being exploited as an alternative form of cheap labour.

Despite being denied the democratic right to move the SEP resolution, SEP member Mike Head, a long-standing WSU academic, interjected, objecting to the fact that none of the speakers had even mentioned the sacking of the 41 security officers. Head demanded that a security officer be invited to speak. As a result, Greg Pinchbeck, one of those losing his job, told the rally that all the security guards faced being thrown into the “horrible” security industry, which has become dominated by low-cost contractors.

Pinchbeck received sympathetic applause, but the NTEU and CPSU have isolated the security officers and refused to mount any fight to defend their jobs. Later, Pinchbeck and other staff members spoke to the WWSW about the issues raised by the protest stoppage.

After the rally, a token march was conducted around the campus to the vice-chancellor’s office, where a four-person delegation presented a collection of hand-written notes, asking Glover to change direction. The ceremony only highlighted the blind alley being offered by the NTEU.

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