

Australian university union leaders quit amid escalating sellouts

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After presiding over a series of betrayals of university workers, the two top officials of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) are standing aside and backing the installation of a more openly pro-management leadership.

Both the national secretary, Grahame McCulloch, who has held the post at either the NTEU or its predecessor union for 35 years, and national president Jeannie Rea, there for eight years, have resigned. According to McCulloch, their aim was to “encourage leadership renewal of the union at all levels.”

The simultaneous departure points to a significant crisis within the university trade union. Disaffection among university staff is growing as the union assists managements to impose government funding cuts via real wage reductions, greater casualisation and heavier workloads.

Since the NTEU was formed in 1993 to enforce the regressive “enterprise bargaining” system, introduced by the Keating Labor government, the union has participated in transforming the country’s public universities into corporatised institutions, serving the narrow profit interests of employers and the corporate elite.

Like all the other trade unions in Australia, the NTEU has used enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs) to split university employees according to their individual workplaces, suppress industrial action and subordinate them to the profit demands of university administrations.

Over the past decade this process has only accelerated, since the NTEU backed the last Greens-backed Labor government’s “education revolution.” This so-called “revolution” has forced under-funded universities to compete with each other to enrol high-fee paying students, attract corporate sponsorships and drive down costs, at the expense of the educational interests of both staff and students.

Between 2009 and 2015, only 6.4 out of every 100 new

positions created at Australian universities were tenured teaching or research jobs. At the same time, the universities and related companies have generated more than \$22 billion a year in revenue for the wealthy elites, mainly by charging exorbitant fees to international students.

Around the world, parallel processes have already triggered strikes this year by university workers and school teachers, including in Britain, Canada, the US, New Zealand and Sri Lanka, often in defiance of their own unions. Similar rebellions are already brewing in Australia.

Over the past year, opposition among university workers has grown to the NTEU’s sellout deals in the seventh round of enterprise bargaining since 1993. These have included a betrayal at the University of Sydney so blatant that the union’s own branch committee recommended a “no” vote; a similar sellout at Western Sydney University, and an agreement at Western Australia’s Murdoch University that cut wages, increased workloads, facilitated retrenchments and overturned hard-won conditions.

To replace McCulloch and Rea, the leadership’s “NTEU Future Team” backed the unopposed nominations of Alison Barnes, from Sydney’s Macquarie University, as president and Matthew McGowan, McCulloch’s long-serving assistant, as secretary.

The election of these two marks a further pro-corporate shift. At Macquarie University, Barnes has pioneered “interest-based bargaining” (IBB), which consists of months of backroom talks, based on defining “common interests” between the union and management.

In reality, IBB means devising schemes to overcome rank-and-file opposition to management demands for further cost-cutting and pro-business restructuring. Over the past six years, prominent trade unions have used IBB to inflict mass retrenchments, wage reductions and the

overturning of hard-won conditions on their members.

At Macquarie, a centrepiece of the IBB drive has been a misleadingly titled “jobs families” proposal, endorsed by Barnes. It will permit management to coerce up to a quarter of academics to allocate 70 or 80 percent of their workload to teaching, with no time for research, overturning the traditional academic workload of 40 percent research, 40 percent teaching and 20 percent administration.

In April, a joint email circulated by Barnes and the university’s human resources director announced “significant progress on the major strategic topic of academic job families” and declared “in principle” agreement on a 2 percent annual pay rise—well below the increase in average household expenses.

At a Macquarie University NTEU branch meeting on June 19, opposition to these joint proposals led to a majority vote for resolutions moved by Socialist Equality Party supporters, calling for a unified national struggle by university workers to overturn budget cuts and for vastly increased education funding, at all levels, to guarantee the basic social right to free, first-class education for all students.

These resolutions were passed in the presence of Barnes and NTEU officials. They advanced a perspective completely opposed to that of the NTEU, which is why Barnes and the union have suppressed them. Unlike other union resolutions, those advanced by the SEP and passed by the union membership have not been circulated to all Macquarie staff or to their colleagues elsewhere. This underscores the anti-democratic character of the union itself, notwithstanding McCulloch’s claim that he led a “highly democratic structure.”

In reality, the NTEU specialises in cajoling university workers into accepting the erosion of their conditions and basic rights, invariably keeping them in the dark about the real content of the agreements that the union signs behind their backs.

The Barnes-McGowan “NTEU Future Team” has nominated Western Australian state secretary Gabe Gooding as assistant national secretary. She was at the centre of this year’s sellout at Murdoch University. According to the Future Team’s election brochure, she “led the campaign against the aggressive management tactic at Murdoch University.”

In fact, the NTEU cynically exploited an application by Murdoch management last year to terminate an existing EBA, initially threatening to unilaterally slash salaries and conditions. The union ultimately pushed through a deal,

despite immense hostility among its members, that gave the management practically everything it wanted.

Nationally, the NTEU insisted that its members could support their Murdoch colleagues by rushing to sign EBAs everywhere else. The NTEU’s sole concern was to preserve its role as the enforcer of management demands.

Because of growing hostility to these betrayals, a rival leadership faction is supporting a pseudo-left candidate against Gooding. University of Technology Sydney branch president Vince Caughley, once a public member of the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), is canvassing votes in the name of “grassroots leadership renewal” to “make union strength a priority.”

The perspective of the pseudo-left organisations is to divert outrage on the part of union members to ever-deepening cuts behind the election of yet another pro-business Labor government.

Whatever the tactical differences between the two factions, Caughley’s position echoes that of the “Future Team” in calling for support for the Australian Council of Trade Unions’ “Change the Rules” campaign.

Also revealing is the fact that Caughley is backed by another ex-ISO leader, Michael Thomson, the union’s New South Wales state secretary, who was instrumental in pushing through last year’s NTEU sellout at the University of Sydney.

To fight for their basic rights, students and university employees must decisively break from the NTEU, and begin to form workplace rank and file committees that are completely independent from the union and from Labor and the Greens. Such committees must turn out to other university workers across the country and to workers everywhere in a unified struggle against wage cuts, the deepening social crisis, and the escalating drive towards authoritarianism and war. This requires a socialist perspective, aimed at the complete reorganisation of society in the interests of the vast majority, not the profits of the wealthy few. We urge all those who want to take forward this fight to **contact** the Committee For Public Education (CFPE), established by the Socialist Equality Party.



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