

Australian pseudo-left groups try to rescue university union from outrage over sellout deal

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After more than a month of closed-door negotiations with the employers, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) yesterday released a “heads of agreement” that confirmed all the warnings issued by the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party. The deal gives a green light to an unprecedented attack on university workers’ jobs, pay and basic conditions.

The NTEU’s agreement allows university managements to not only cut wages by up to 15 percent but also destroy thousands of jobs, including by forced redundancies. This proves the utter fraud of the union’s claim to be seeking to “protect jobs” from the worsening fallout from the global COVID-19 pandemic.

The deal also exposes the desperate efforts of pseudo-left groups to prevent a revolt by university workers and students from getting out of the control of the NTEU. Among NTEU members, already shocked by the union rushing into these talks, behind their backs, outrage is mounting as the details of its deal become known.

One pseudo-left outfit, Socialist Alliance, has been the most blatant in its support for the sacrifices offered by the union, in which its members hold several posts. Confronted by the widespread anger, it has appealed for “unity” behind the NTEU. It has done so on the basis of openly backing the union’s rush to offer concessions to the employers.

In a podcast organised by the group’s *Green Left Weekly*, Jonathon Strauss, the NTEU branch president at James Cook University and Socialist Alliance member, declared: “We make compromises all the time, for example in industrial agreements, we even find sometimes we have to surrender something that we

used to have.”

This is exactly what the NTEU and all the trade unions have done for decades, especially since the Accords they signed with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments and big business in the 1980s and 1990s.

These Accords tore up jobs, wages and conditions under the banner of making Australian employers “globally competitive.” They transformed the unions from limited defensive organisations of the working class, seeking concessions within the framework of wage labour, into industrial police forces, reversing all the past gains and suppressing all rank-and-file opposition.

The Accords paved the way for the imposition of enterprise bargaining, whereby unions tie their members to the profit-making requirements of individual employers and enforce laws that ban all industrial action, except for during union-controlled “bargaining periods.”

Together with all the other unions, the NTEU has straitjacketed its members within this system since the 1990s, and it has continued to do so during the crisis triggered by the pandemic, constantly warning members that they will face massive fines if they take industrial action to fight the offensive of the employers and the federal government.

Another pseudo-left group, Socialist Alternative has taken a more duplicitous approach, feigning outrage at the NTEU’s concessions while issuing appeals to the union to at least appear to take a more militant approach. Its “NTEU Fightback”-sponsored petition advises the union that it “cannot be seen to be bargaining away our pay and conditions, it has to fight

for them.”

Socialist Alternative’s “Vote No” campaign criticises the union for offering concessions, but promotes the fatal illusion that the union can be pressured into leading a fight against the university managements and the government. Its appeals for a more militant-looking stance are designed to corral discontented workers back into the arms of the union apparatuses.

Katie Wood, an NTEU branch committee member and member of Socialist Alternative wrote in the group’s *Red Flag*: “A leadership that genuinely wanted to fight would be trying to harness the energy apparent in the mobilisations against concessions, at the very least as a bargaining chip.”

This is also precisely what the unions have done for decades: Use workers’ hostility as a “bargaining chip” to impose enterprise agreements that entrench the role of the unions as employer partners and enforcers of their requirements.

The “NTEU Fightback” campaign is now promoting a token May 21 “day of action” adopted by the NTEU as a means of diverting university workers and students from a rebellion against its pact with the employers.

According to the NTEU website, the aim of this “day of action” is to show: “We’re not going to let our sector hit the wall without a fight.” This indicates that the union has taken the advice of Socialist Alternative to “be seen” to fight to defend pay and conditions, while signalling its ongoing commitment to save “the sector,” that is, the higher education industry.

In the name of mounting a campaign against the Liberal-National government’s refusal to bailout the industry, the NTEU is asking its members to send messages on May 21 to Education Minister Dan Tehan, asking him for help. The campaign slogan is: “You have one job, Dan: Save higher ed.”

In line with this grovelling appeal, the NTEU has decided to support “limited” and “modest” activities on the day, like car cavalcades to Liberal Party offices.

As this line-up demonstrates, Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative falsely claim the title “socialist” in order to act as lightning rods for discontent. They have nothing whatsoever to do with genuine socialism. Hostile to any politically independent struggle by the working class, they seek to tie workers to the pro-capitalist union apparatuses.

In order to oppose the collaboration of the NTEU and

their pseudo-left apologists, workers and students need to form new independent organisations, such as workplace action committees, fighting for a society that is based on human need, not corporate profit.

Members of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), formed by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) are fighting for this socialist perspective. They have moved resolutions at NTEU branch meetings rejecting any concessions and condemning all efforts to make university workers and students pay for the billions of dollars cut from funding by Liberal-National and Labor governments over the past decade, and the failure of capitalist governments to avert the global COVID-19 pandemic.

They have opposed the splitting up of university employees, via the variation of individual enterprise agreements, and called for a national stoppage and mass online meetings to plan a unified struggle against the sweeping attack on jobs, pay and conditions.

These resolutions have demanded that, instead of big business and the banks being bailed out with billions of dollars, resources be poured into education, at all levels, to guarantee the basic social right to free, first-class education for all students, including international students, and full-time jobs for all university workers.

They have called for the formation of rank-and-file action committees of tertiary education workers and students—independent of the NTEU, governments and employers—to fight for these demands and ensure the health, safety and well-being of workers and students from COVID-19, before any return to face-to-face teaching and working.

To take forward this discussion and organise a fight against the NTEU sellout, the CFPE is holding an online forum this Sunday, May 17, at 4 pm: “The COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis in the universities.”

To participate contact the **CFPE Facebook site** or email the SEP at sep@sep.org.au, or click on this Zoom link just before 4 pm on Sunday: <https://zoom.us/j/94447278547>



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