

Australian pseudo-left groups protect university union from revolt against pay-cutting plans

A correspondent
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There is a deep crisis in Australia's university sector and the trade unions covering its workers, triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, coming on top of years of multi-billion dollar funding cuts by the current Liberal-National Coalition government and the previous Greens-backed Labor government.

Universities Australia has estimated that the 39 public universities will lose revenues of \$16 billion between June this year and 2023, including up to \$4.8 billion this year, with up to 30,000 jobs to be eliminated as a result.

As soon as the pandemic began to hit the universities, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) rushed into backroom talks with management, offering wage cuts of up to 15 percent while still agreeing to the destruction of at least 18,000 jobs. None of this was authorised by NTEU members, who only found out about the pay-cutting via media reports.

By volunteering such unprecedented sacrifices, the NTEU made clear its commitment to work with the managements to help them exploit the pandemic to impose far-reaching cuts and restructuring on university workers, both academic and administrative. For two months, while the closed-door negotiations continued, the union's branches stifled any struggle against the offensive, permitting hundreds of job cuts, particularly of casual workers.

However, the NTEU-management "Job Protection Framework," finally revealed to university workers last month, provoked such intense opposition from staff that the NTEU's national executive was forced to call off a national ballot over its fears, shared by the employers, that a vote could result in a historic defeat for the union.

Nevertheless, at individual universities across the country, the union is proceeding to try to foist similar job- and pay-cutting agreements on its members and all university workers. It is using anti-democratic methods to suppress opposition, even overturning union branch resolutions in order to do so.

In response to these bitter experiences and the breakdown in the union's credibility, pseudo-left groups are attempting to prevent workers from breaking out of the union's industrial and political straitjacket.

Two groups, Solidarity and Socialist Alliance, are outright defenders of the NTEU. In Solidarity's article, "The NTEU Framework Agreement is dead—Now we fight the cuts," the authors apologetically describe the collapsed deal as simply a "mistake." They endorse NTEU national president Alison Barnes's cynical claim that "the NTEU will now escalate to what will be historically high levels of industrial disputation and campaigning to fight for every job," even though Barnes said this was something the union had wanted to avoid.

In fact, the union is intensifying what it has done for decades—blocking industrial action and working hand-in-glove with managements to strike deals that satisfy their budgetary and restructuring requirements. For many years, NTEU enterprise bargaining agreements have helped employers and successive governments increasingly transform universities into highly-casualised business operations.

Again and again, as it always has, the NTEU has invoked the Fair Work Act (FWA), which outlaws all industrial action except during union-controlled "bargaining periods." At virtually every meeting, the union has warned its members that they would face huge fines if they took any industrial action against job and pay cuts.

Solidarity's article calls this legislation, "the Coalition's (Un) Fair Work Act," concealing the reality that it was the Labor Party, with the full support of the unions, that implemented the FWA when Labor was last in office.

Like Solidarity, Socialist Alliance claims that the collapse of the NTEU's framework means that the union will now lead a struggle to protect jobs and conditions. *Green Left Weekly* published an article by Susan Price, a former NTEU branch president, "After debate, NTEU commits to an industrial fight for jobs."

Price claims that NTEU members have “welcomed the leadership’s turn” and “are keen to join a vigorous campaign to defeat any *non-union* ballots,” which will “provide the best opportunity to build the union’s numbers” (emphasis added).

This dovetails with the NTEU’s only concern, which is to defeat “non-union” ballots in order to maintain its place as the enforcer of management demands. The union has opposed postal ballots conducted by the management without the union’s agreement. But this is not because the union rejects pay and job cuts. On the contrary, it is offering to enforce them, in partnership with the managements.

There is no brick wall separating the union bureaucracy from the pseudo-left groups and the middle class milieu in which they operate, which provides a training ground for many union leaders. As an article in *Red Flag*, “How socialists should respond to union sell-outs,” published by Socialist Alternative reveals, NTEU president Barnes was a member of the International Socialist Organisation in the 1990s, out of which both Solidarity, and Socialist Alternative emerged.

Likewise, Michael Thomson, the NTEU’s New South Wales (NSW) state secretary, was a member of Solidarity, while Damien Cahill, the NSW assistant secretary, was involved in student protest politics at the University of Wollongong. All three are NTEU national executive members.

This career path is no accident. Ever since the transformation of the unions into outright industrial police forces, in response to the globalisation of production in the 1980s, the pseudo-left groups have acted as their main cheerleaders and political defenders.

In order to head off the hostility of university workers to the NTEU’s betrayals, Socialist Alternative has taken a seemingly more radical stance than the other pseudo-left outfits. It condemned the NTEU’s national framework, while still urging university workers to join and build the union, holding out the prospect of pressuring union leaders to change course.

Yet the same *Red Flag* article insists that it is incorrect for “socialists” to refuse to work with “left officials,” by which they mean the likes of Barnes, Thomson and Cahill. Instead, “insofar as the left officials are on occasion prepared to issue calls for action,” Socialist Alternative members should “seize such openings to build rank and file union power.”

This amounts to covering for the NTEU bureaucrats as they collaborate in implementing far-reaching attacks on university workers, just as the unions are doing in every other major industry. In response to the COVID-19 crisis, another “left official,” secretary of the peak Australian Council of Trade Unions, Sally McManus, led the way,

vowing to give employers “everything they want.”

Not one step forward can be taken under these thoroughly anti-working-class institutions. Instead, university workers, in partnership with students, need to construct new rank-and-file organisations that are totally independent of the NTEU apparatus, as well as its pseudo-left backers.

That is why the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) are calling for “no” votes in all the ballots currently being organised, including the joint NTEU-management ones, to endorse job and pay cuts.

This is a first step toward a unified struggle by university workers and students for the defence of jobs and conditions and for the right to decent, free and first-class education for all, including international students.

This means directly challenging the capitalist profit system and turning to a socialist perspective, based on the total reorganisation of society in the interests of all, instead of the financial oligarchy.

In this fight, university workers and students will find their allies, not in the union bureaucrats, but in other layers of the working class in Australia and internationally, who also face combined attacks by unions and management.

We urge all university workers and students who want to take forward this fight to contact the CFPE or IYSSE, both established by the Socialist Equality Party. You can contact us at the links below.

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To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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