

“NTEU Fightback” aims to block revolt against Australian university trade union

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Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has stepped up its collaboration with Australian university managements to impose unprecedented attacks on the jobs, pay and conditions of university workers.

This has sparked an incipient rebellion among staff members. They have been shocked and disgusted at the role the NTEU has played in offering pay cuts of up to 15 percent and job cuts in March, and then working with individual managements to inflict similar reversals, even after the defeat and collapse of its “national framework” offer to the employers.

The NTEU’s conduct, however, is no aberration. Like the rest of the trade union movement, it has performed an industrial policing function for the employers for decades via retrograde enterprise agreements. These agreements have assisted governments and managements transform the universities into corporate entities with about 70 percent of their workforces on insecure or casual contracts.

Various pseudo-left organisations, such as Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative, are desperately seeking to defend the union. As a recently revised “six-point plan” released by the pseudo-left-dominated NTEU Fightback group makes clear, their aim is to channel university workers back into the arms of the NTEU, then join the union leadership and preside over cuts themselves.

The document does not mention the worsening global COVID-19 pandemic, which is destroying the lives and livelihoods of workers worldwide, due to the profit-driven responses of governments and big business. Yet the same ruling class is exploiting the international catastrophe to accelerate its decades-long assault on public education and the conditions of the entire working class.

NTEU Fightback’s glaring omission is no accident. Despite the monumental failure of global capitalism to protect lives and the mercenary “return to work” drive of capitalist governments everywhere, the group offers no political perspective to oppose the dictates of the financial elite.

While the pseudo-left groups misleadingly label themselves “socialist,” the document opposes any struggle for a socialist program. Instead, the document’s preoccupation is keeping university workers straitjacketed within the NTEU and the pro-

capitalist perspective of trade unions, which is to tie workers to the needs of their employers.

The document begins by dismissing the NTEU’s proposal to cut wages by 15 percent, while agreeing to 18,000 job cuts, as a “pathetic surrender” that “put the union on the wrong side.” In fact, the NTEU was neither surrendering nor switching sides when it proposed job and wage cuts. It was intensifying its longstanding role in enforcing government and management cuts via enterprise agreements that have made the union a partner with the employers.

This time, however, the NTEU actively volunteered outright pay and job cuts, which is why the pseudo-left groups are attempting to downplay the significance of this naked collaboration.

The document reiterates NTEU Fightback’s appeal to the union leadership to have “a red hot go” at defending the “existing, legally protected, enterprise agreement conditions.” In other words, NTEU Fightback defends the existing agreements, which have created the worsening conditions facing academics and staff, including high levels of casualisation, and permitted hundreds of job cuts already since the start of the pandemic.

While NTEU Fightback claims it will fight against “massive cuts and job losses,” it opposes taking any “unprotected industrial action”—that is, outside the straitjacket of the industrial laws. This directly echoes the position of the NTEU, which has repeatedly told its members they cannot take any industrial action.

In fact, NTEU Fightback directly attacks calls for industrial action by members, declaring: “Nor are we going to build union strength by wishing unprotected industrial action into existence in the next couple of months: it requires serious and sustained organising.” This essentially ensures that workers’ hands are tied as the federal Liberal-National government implements a major attack on university students and workers.

Australia has draconian anti-strike laws. Individual workers can be fined thousands of dollars for taking any kind of industrial action except during narrow enterprise agreement “bargaining” periods every three years, and under strict conditions agreed to by the union. This legislation was introduced by the former Rudd Labor government and fully

endorsed by the unions, including the NTEU, in order to entrench their place as industrial police forces.

Point one of the NTEU Fightback document vaguely calls for a “no” vote on “concessional variations” to enterprise agreements, but only to “send a signal to management, and to the union, that further demands for concessions will face substantial opposition.” In other words, a “no” vote is not to be part of a campaign to fight for jobs and conditions, but rather a pathetic threat of future opposition if management and the union go further.

The primary concern of the group is to “build union strength,” that is, to keep workers tied to the very organisation responsible for implementing cuts. In point three, it criticises the leadership for being “too preoccupied with using wage-cutting schemes to get a seat at the negotiating table,” rather than fostering “concrete organising activity.”

That is because NTEU Fightback would like its own “seat at the table.” Point 6 calls for the election of NTEU Fightback members into union positions. “Getting into office has never been what has motivated NTEU Fightback,” it claims. “On the other hand, giving a good shakeup to the incumbents who have advocated the terrible attacks in the National Framework is a worthwhile aim.”

The document speaks of “having a few officials” committed to “organise and fight in response to a crisis.” This is a complete fraud. The clearest indication of the “fight” the NTEU Fightback group intends is demonstrated by its “model” for “our own circumstances” in point four. It hails the 2012 Chicago teachers’ strike as “an important defensive win on conditions,” that broke “the pattern of defeat and retreat.”

The nine-day strike by 26,000 teachers in Chicago was a major development in the class struggle but it was betrayed by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), which then collaborated in the largest school closings in US history.

Within one year, 50 schools were closed in Chicago, and 3,500 teachers and support staff were laid off. By contrast, it represented a major gain for then CTU vice-president and now president Jesse Sharkey, who was a member of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization (ISO) until it dissolved itself in 2019.

The trade-off for the betrayal of the strike was that the CTU would be permitted to organise staff at a major “charter” school, thereby ensuring the continued flow of dues into union coffers despite the sackings.

The NTEU Fightback document claims that the 2012 Chicago strike became an “inspiration” for “detailed workplace organising” that “eventually led to the incredible wave of teacher strikes in the US in 2018 and 2019.”

The teacher strikes of 2018–19 were part of an international upsurge of the working class, and took the form of a rebellion against the unions. In West Virginia, 33,000 teachers and school staff struck between February 22 and March 6, 2018. The strike was organised in cafeteria meetings and on social

media, in defiance of the union leadership.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained at the time: “By revolting, the striking workers had, at least temporarily, broken through the straitjacket imposed by the unions, and this incipient working class movement became a powerful pole of attraction for workers and youth throughout the state, the country and the world.”

In opposition to the determination of workers to keep fighting, pseudo-left organisations, such as the ISO and Socialist Alternative, having largely ignored the strike, suddenly swung into action to declare a sellout proposed by the education unions as a major victory and the strike over. This facilitated the unions’ betrayal of the strike. On March 6, they pushed through a deal, without any discussion, that addressed none of the substantial concerns of the workers, including their healthcare costs.

This provides an illustration of the real role of the pseudo-left critics in the NTEU. Their aim is to do everything they can to prevent a break with the unions, and to become part of the union apparatuses themselves.

As in the US, the manoeuvres of the pseudo-left flow from their class basis, as organisations that are hostile to the fight for socialism and the independent interests of the working class.

Groups such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance speak for affluent layers of the upper-middle class. Through their promotion of the unions, along with Labor and the Greens, they seek to advance the interests of this privileged constituency and prevent any movement from below that would threaten the political establishment, of which they are a part.

University staff need to draw the necessary lessons about the role of the unions and their pseudo-left accomplices, both in Australia and internationally. Above all, rank-and-file committees independent of the unions are needed to unite academics, professional staff, and students in a coordinated struggle, as advocated by the recent joint statement of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE).

In this fight, university workers and students will find their allies among school teachers, parents, and workers more broadly, who face the same union-management assault. The defence of public education, jobs and conditions requires a socialist program to meet the needs of all, not the dictates of the wealthy capitalist elite. We are holding a joint CFPE and IYSSE online public forum this Saturday, July 18, to take forward this struggle and urge you to attend.



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