“NTEU Fightback” aims to replace the discredited Australian university union leadership

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Amid the greatest crisis of the university sector in decades, compounded by the global COVID-19 pandemic, the pseudo-left tendencies around the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) are trying to fashion themselves as a new leadership for the union.

These groups criticise some of the most blatant offers of sacrifices of jobs, wages and basic conditions made to the university managements by the increasingly discredited current union leadership, which have sparked rebellions against the NTEU.

At the same time, the fake “socialist” groups are trying to head off these revolts by urging university workers to join and try to rebuild the same union.

These supposed “socialists” are seeking to keep workers trapped within the industrial and political straitjacket of the NTEU and all the other trade unions. They are hoping to follow in the footsteps of their pseudo-left predecessors in taking full-time positions in the union bureaucracy.

The grouping around “NTEU Fightback,” which has close ties with Socialist Alternative (SAlt), is the most revealing.

In an article “NTEU Fightback: Rank and file rebellion in a most unlikely union,” published in the latest edition of SAlt’s *Marxist Left Review*, Diane Fieldes and Jordan Humphreys, begin by saying: “The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally transformed the university sector.”

In reality, the pandemic has only laid bare and accelerated catastrophic processes that have been underway for decades.

The purpose of their formulation is to conceal the fact that the NTEU has long played the central role in implementing attacks on university educators and staff. Via one enterprise agreement after another, the NTEU has facilitated the transformation of universities into highly-casualised corporate entities serving the needs of big business.

As part of this process, the NTEU fully backed the last Greens-backed Labor Party government’s “education revolution.” Introduced in 2012, it compelled universities to compete with each other for enrolments, while cutting billions of dollars from their budgets by the time the government lost office in 2013. The current Liberal-National government has simply intensified the process.

The SAlt leaders present the union leaders as mistaken, or weak. “Shamefully, the top officials of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) responded by surrendering without a fight,” they write.

There was no “surrender.” Instead, the NTEU led the offensive against workers, which has continued unabated. At the start of the pandemic, the union leaders rushed into closed-door discussions with the employers. On May 13, the NTEU released a “Job Protection Framework,” which called for wage cuts of up to 15 percent, and for the acceptance of the destruction of an estimated 18,000 jobs.

This was no aberration. It was not only in line with the NTEU’s long prior record. It matched similar moves by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the trade union movement as a whole to impose sweeping cuts of jobs, working hours, penalty wage rates and other basic conditions on millions of workers, including in the retail, hospitality and clerical sectors.

Hostility by many members forced the NTEU to withdraw its framework, but the union officials only stepped-up their partnerships with individual managements to impose cuts, while blocking any unified national struggle. This has paved the way for a tidal wave of job losses and restructuring.

The NTEU’s conduct is a continuation of the role of the unions over decades in collaborating with employers to attack working class conditions. Under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments from 1983 to 1996 the unions, through a series of Accords, joined with the government and industry leaders to impose sweeping job and wage cuts, break up shopfloor workers’ committees and begin the pro-market restructuring of the economy, including education, to make Australian capitalism more profitable.

The root cause of this collaboration by the unions, not just in Australia but on a global scale, was to be found in the globalisation of production, which shattered the previous trade union perspective of seeking concessions within national economies while tying workers to the wage labour system of capitalism. The unions became police forces over workers,

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intent on making "their" national capitalist economy "competitive" on world markets by extracting sacrifices from their members.

SAlt claims that unions can be rebuilt to defend workers. That is because SAlt is seeking to enter the union bureaucracy in order to save it, just like SAlt's forerunners.

As the article notes, Alison Barnes, the NTEU national president, was a member of one of SAlt's antecedents, the International Socialist Organisation (ISO) and Michael Thomson, the union's New South Wales (NSW) state secretary, was a member of Solidarity, another ISO offshoot, and continues to work closely with them.

Likewise, another NTEU national executive member, Damien Cahill, the NSW assistant secretary, was a student protestor and editor of the University of Wollongong's student newspaper, and the NTEU branch presidents at James Cook University and Charles Sturt University are members of another pseudo-left group, Socialist Alliance.

SAlt members themselves sit on various union branch committees. Their aim is to fully enter the union bureaucracy. In their article, Fieldes and Humphreys insist that SAlt members must work with any union boss, "even the most despicable." Moreover, even though the "left officials" (such as Barnes, Thomson and Cahill) have a history of "selling out rank and file members," it would be a mistake to write them off.

The article says SAlt is engaged in activity that is "modest in scale" in other unions too, "and none of it is anywhere near enough to turn the tide in the class struggle." For Fieldes and Humphreys the supposedly "difficult objective conditions" mean it is necessary to "work with trade union officials on joint campaigns where possible."

The truth is that SAlt and all the pseudo-left satellites of the unions are concerned about a movement of the working class erupting outside the unions. That is why they constantly turn reality on its head to present defeats as "victories."

In another article published in Socialist Alternative's *Red Flag* in July, titled "The NTEU fightback goes on—on difficult terrain," Fieldes claims that members of NTEU Fightback and "other union activists" at the University of Melbourne "defeated a management-initiated attack on wages and conditions in June." This "sent a message to higher education workers everywhere that it is possible to defeat such attacks," although "so far it has been an isolated success."

This was not a "success" but a slight delay as university management prepared to implement sweeping job cuts with the collaboration of the NTEU. In early August, Vice-Chancellor Duncan Maskell announced the destruction of 450 permanent jobs, or the equivalent of 5 percent of the workforce, plus an unknown number of casual and fixed-term positions. Maskell told staff that he would begin "formal consultation" with the NTEU to work out the details.

While a disaster for workers, for the NTEU this is a "success" because it retained its role as the facilitator of the management's cuts, stifling staff opposition and keeping a seat at the negotiating table. This is precisely the role the NTEU has played in enforcing pay and job cuts on campuses nationally.

Fieldes attempts to portray this collaboration as an unfortunate error on the part of the union leaders, who mistakenly believe that agreeing to cuts will save jobs. "Agreeing to wage cuts and undermining conditions just signals to the government and management that university workers are an easy target," Fieldes writes. "But the NTEU officials are incapable of learning this lesson."

But no break from the NTEU can be tolerated. Hence Fieldes concludes by stating that the tasks of NTEU Fightback remain, "arguing that unions exist to fight the bosses, not to do deals with them, and building rank and file confidence to act on it."

In other words, the task of the NTEU Fightback group is to instil illusions among workers "that unions exist to fight the bosses," when these apparatuses have long ceased to be working class organisations in any sense.

NTEU Fightback and similar pseudo-left groups are fashioning themselves as the union's future leaders and beneficiaries of all the associated perks and privileges.

To fight for their interests, university workers must break free from the union bureaucracy. They have to join with students in building new organisations of struggle—rank-and-file committees, totally independent of the unions. These committees are essential to prosecute a national and international industrial and political struggle against all the union-enforced cuts, as well as returns to classrooms in unsafe COVID-19 conditions.

This requires rejecting the dictates of 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. That is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party and the Committee for Public Education.

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