

Australian universities pseudo-left “network” postpones forum at NTEU’s behest

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It was a telling display of the subservience of Australia’s pseudo-left groups to the trade unions that have enforced the destruction of jobs and conditions throughout the working class for decades.

On October 14, the “National Higher Education Action Network (NHEAN),” which describes itself as “a group of rank and file NTEU [National Tertiary Education Union] members,” sent out an apologetic email.

“This Friday, we were to host a lunchtime forum to explore possibilities of industrial action,” it said. “With universities facing the most serious crisis in their recent history, we believe that these kinds of conversation among union members are essential.

“Unfortunately, we’ve been forced to postpone the forum for one week following an intervention from the NTEU NSW Division Secretary, Michael Thomson.

“Among the speakers on Friday was to be Shane Reside. Shane is an experienced organiser with the MUA [Maritime Union of Australia], and a former NTEU branch organiser. Shane was going to speak to us about industrial action, protected and unprotected, and share some of the lessons from his extensive organising experience.”

The organisers no doubt expected this union official to promote illusions in the MUA, as a supposed militant union, even though it functions like the rest of the Australian Council of Trade Unions. It has repeatedly suppressed or called off industrial action and presided over the destruction of thousands of jobs on the waterfront over the past 30 years.

“However, Shane has now—reluctantly—withdrawn from the forum after a conversation with Michael Thomson. On Tuesday, Michael rang Shane and asked him not to speak to us. Michael said that doing so would represent an endorsement by the MUA of NHEAN over the elected leadership of the NTEU.”

According to the email, “Shane felt that under these circumstances, he could not proceed, and he sends his apologies.”

Despite the NTEU’s typically anti-democratic intervention, the NHEAN said it hoped “Michael” would attend the postponed event, even though he had “chosen to undermine our efforts for a more engaged, better informed union.”

This bowing to the *NTEU* confirms the *Site’s* analysis of the online “assembly” that the NHEAN conducted in late August. This grouping, which brings together members of various pseudo-left organisations, is “an attempt to divert the growing disgust among university workers with the role of the sector’s trade unions in volunteering unprecedented sacrifices, including large pay cuts, back into the arms of the very same unions.”

The NHEAN is opposed to any action that would threaten the role of the NTEU and the other unions that have blocked any unified struggle against the destruction of an estimated 90,000 jobs throughout the country’s public universities since March.

The NHEAN never mentions, let alone opposes, the fact that the NTEU is continuing to push through deals with the employers at individual universities to extract cuts to pay and conditions from its members, supposedly in return for meaningless promises to inflict fewer job losses.

The pseudo-left groups involved—including Socialist Alternative, Socialist Alliance and Solidarity—aspire to join the leadership of the union themselves. They are following in the footsteps of earlier members of their groups, such as Thomson and NTEU national president Alison Barnes, who are today enforcing unprecedented cuts to jobs and conditions.

For this Friday’s postponed forum, Reside has been replaced by Erima Dall, a member of Solidarity, who is billed as “a widely-respected rank and file member” of the MUA.

According to the forum ad, Dall “will speak about Australia’s Industrial Relations laws and how unions can and should challenge these laws.” This is designed to cover up the fact that the unions themselves drafted these laws under their Accords with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996, and then in partnership with the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013.

The current Liberal-National Coalition government has left these “Fair Work” laws intact precisely because the legislation enshrines the role of the unions as an industrial police force over the working class. The laws ban all forms of industrial action, except during union-controlled “bargaining periods” with employers for enterprise agreements.

The NHEAN whitewashes the pro-management role of the NTEU and other unions, saying they have been “largely

powerless to defend staff, students, and universities” because of their “low membership levels” and “some of the most punitive” anti-strike laws in the world.

Not a word of this is true. The unions have done everything they can to stifle or block resistance, constantly threatening workers with the laws they helped write, leading to the collapse of union memberships.

According to the ad, the postponed event “will hear from other unions how they are using Health and Safety legislation to organise industrial action, and how actions can be taken despite the Industrial Relations laws.”

In other words, far from “challenging” the laws, the discussion will focus on keeping workers straitjacketed within them, while using safety issues to take limited actions to let off steam—all within the Labor-union pro-business framework of striking mutually beneficial deals with employers.

NHEAN’s primary example of the kind of action it is seeking is revealing. It claims that “mass political strikes organised by trade unions, university students and high school students in 1999, for instance, successfully pressured the Australian government to oppose the Indonesian occupation of East Timor.”

This is a rewriting of history. It displays once again the thoroughly pro-imperialist character of the pseudo-left. In 1999 the Howard Liberal-National Coalition government, backed by the Clinton administration in the US, dispatched troops to East Timor for one reason only: To secure Australian capitalism’s grip over the large oil and gas fields in the Timor Sea.

Far from seeking to save the Timorese masses from a bloodbath by the Indonesian military, the Australian ruling class stepped in once the violence was over, after backing the Indonesian occupation of the eastern half of the island since Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam gave General Suharto’s dictatorship the green light to invade in 1975.

Politically, the Howard government relied upon the pseudo-left organisations, which organised “troops in” demonstrations in the lead-up to the deployment. Then, as now, these groups performed a direct service to the Australian ruling elite.

Likewise, the resolution that NHEAN proposed at its August “assembly” embraced the underlying agenda of the corporate elite. It called for the redirection into education spending of “unnecessary” military spending—as if some were necessary. It proposed “accessible” education for students, not the basic social right to free education and the cancellation of all fee debts. Similarly, it did not demand an end to the rampant casualisation of university workers, just a meaningless “radical” reduction.

Far from denouncing the NTEU’s betrayals, that resolution called for an alliance with the union. It proposed a protest demonstration “involving the NTEU” in October before the Liberal-National government’s budget and asked the NTEU to support “rank-and-file actions.”

Nothing of the sort happened. The union-backed Labor Party

helped push the budget through parliament in just three days, without any significant protests. The NTEU conducted a petition and email-writing campaign, unsuccessfully pleading with right-wing “independent” members of parliament to oppose the government’s “Jobs-Ready Graduates” bill, which inflicted deeper cuts on the public universities and more than doubled the fees for many students.

Despite the bipartisan line-up behind the budget’s vast tax handouts to business and wealthiest layers of society, the NHEAN is trying to revive illusions that another Greens-backed Labor government would be any different from the last one. It remains deliberately silent on the record of the previous Labor governments in partnering with the unions to suppress workers’ struggles and slash billions of dollars from university funding.

To fight the deepening attack on public education, the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) have jointly called for the formation of genuine rank-and-file committees of university workers and students to fight all the union-enforced attacks.

These committees, totally independent of the NTEU, are essential to organise a nationwide, unified struggle, including a general strike, for secure well-paid jobs and basic rights, protect staff and students from unsafe COVID-19 conditions and link up with school teachers and other workers nationally and internationally who are facing similar critical struggles against the impact of the worsening global crisis.

That requires 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. We urge university workers and students to contact us.



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