

Australian university casuals group tries to divide workers and promote trade unions

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An online “summit” organised by the “Casualised, Unemployed and Precarious University Workers” (CUPUW) on April 9–10 was a reactionary exercise in splitting university workers and funnelling their rising discontent back behind the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU).

University employees, both full-time and casual, have been among the hardest hit in Australia amid the wholesale offensive against workers’ conditions by governments and employers during the COVID-19 pandemic. University managements, faced by drops in enrolments of international students whom they have used as cash cows to offset government funding cuts, have imposed tens of thousands of job cuts, assisted by the NTEU.

By the NTEU’s own estimate last year, the total job losses could be as high as 90,000, including casuals, but universities refuse to provide the relevant statistics on casuals and fixed-term staff.

The CUPUW event attracted around 60 people at its peak, many of whom were event organisers, union delegates and officials. From the outset, CUPUW attempted to create a rift between casual and permanent university workers. It barred full-time staff from participating and insinuated that they were responsible for the destruction of casual jobs.

Chairing the meeting, Bianca Hennessy from the Australian National University (ANU) stated: “This event is autonomous to university precarious workers... If you’re permanently employed by the university, we’re sorry but this isn’t the space for you.”

Hennessy declared: “In our sector, permanently employed staff often hold the keys to a casual staff member’s next contract. We’ve learned that precarious workers often feel much more comfortable sharing their experiences when they’re around just other precarious members.”

Later, the poisonous and twisted logic of this divisiveness was more explicitly displayed. During report backs from breakout group discussions, one group suggested that casuals confront permanent staff and ask them to justify their higher salaries “as a provocation” and “asking the hard question.”

Such a line blames fellow workers, rather than the employers and governments, for the assault on public education. It pits workers against each other and opposes the necessity for a unified struggle against the slashing of jobs and courses. Exactly the opposite fight is needed, to demand the basic right of all casuals to full-time work.

In the words of the resolution adopted by a joint public meeting hosted by the Committee for Public Education and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality: “Demand that, instead of big business being bailed out with billions of dollars, and billions more being handed into the military, resources be poured into healthcare and education funding, to protect the population from COVID-19 and guarantee the basic social right to free, first-class education for all students, including international students, and full-time jobs for all university workers.”

That demand means challenging and overthrowing the dictates of the financial markets, instead of keeping workers straitjacketed within the bankrupt capitalist framework, with the unions acting as industrial police forces.

Organisations such as CUPUW are seeking to block such a political struggle. They have a dual purpose: 1) to divert opposition among workers back into the hands of the trade union apparatuses that, over decades, have enforced the dictates of managements and governments, and 2) to elevate their own members into privileged posts inside the union bureaucracy.

The main speaker at the “summit” was Anastasia Kanjere from Melbourne’s Monash University. Kanjere

noted that CUPUW held its first national meeting last year amid growing anger among university workers over secretive discussions between the NTEU and university managements.

On May 13, 2020, after weeks of backroom negotiations with management representatives, the NTEU announced a fraudulently-named “Jobs Protection Framework” that allowed employers to cut wages by up to 15 percent and still destroy “at least 12,000 jobs nationally.” After outraged opposition from university workers, most employers abandoned the deal, fearing that the NTEU could not enforce it.

Nevertheless, NTEU branches at individual universities proceeded to work with managements to strike similar pacts to enforce wage cuts, job losses and the gutting of conditions.

Kanjere totally distorted this record in order to justify CUPUW’s divisive stance. She said precarious and unemployed workers needed to be included in the union leadership “rather than relegated to a bargaining chip that can be traded away at the negotiations table for better conditions for ongoing staff.”

This stands reality on its head. The NTEU’s deals with the employers throughout the pandemic have typified and intensified the union’s role in undercutting the conditions for all staff, not just casuals, for decades.

While criticising some actions of the NTEU leadership, CUPUW is trying to funnel rank-and-file discontent back behind the unions and capitalist parties like the Greens and Labor.

Kanjere said CUPUW had hosted “guest speakers” from “radical” organisations. Among them were unions such as the United Workers Union, which earlier this year sold out 350 workers at Coles’s Smeaton Grange warehouse after they had courageously rejected one union-company deal after another, defying a 14-week lockout.

The speaker also mentioned “roundtable discussions” with Greens Senator Mehreen Faruqi, who has falsely postured as a defender of tertiary education. In fact, the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard introduced the market-based “education revolution” that provided the platform for the deepening attack on university staff and inflicted the largest ever cut—\$2.3 billion—to university funding.

Both the National Higher Education Action Network (NHEAN)—formed by fake “left” groups—and NTEU “Fightback”—closely tied to the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative—have also been involved in CUPUW discussions. Kanjere said that, despite “comradely

disagreements,” CUPUW, NHEAN and “Fightback” have “shared goals of building a democratic, lively and fighting union.”

CUPUW wants to join the union machines, not oppose them. In its online magazine, the *Fox*, CUPUW published an editorial on February 18 titled, “Reflecting on the NTEU in 2020.” It stated: “We try to be the union we want to see... Still, there’s space for some constructive criticism of the NTEU, as elections come up. We deserve and will demand much better from our union leadership.” The editorial criticised the NTEU for “stagnant leadership” and a lack of casual representation in executive positions.

Kanjere reported CUPUW had lobbied for casuals to be appointed to NTEU branch committees at ANU, Monash University, La Trobe University and the University of Sydney. CUPUW has held events encouraging casuals to run for posts in upcoming union elections.

Kanjere declared: “We are also pro-union. We believe that unions driven by the will and agency of rank-and-file members are the way forward for workers to gain control of their workplaces.”

But the latest betrayals by the NTEU are not an aberration. Through one enterprise agreement after another, the NTEU has presided over the decimation of jobs and conditions, including the vast casualisation of universities, for decades. This is a universal experience. Unions everywhere have transformed into thoroughly pro-capitalist apparatuses, presiding over their own investments and superannuation funds.

In opposition to the corporatist unions, what is required is the formation of rank-and-file committees of university workers and students to conduct a unified counter-offensive by university workers across Australia and internationally against the assault on jobs, conditions, and courses, and for permanent positions for all.

This is the perspective of the Committee For Public Education and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, as part of the fight for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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