

Australian university trade union backs “education business”

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12 May 2021

Throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), Australia’s main university trade union, has collaborated closely with university managements, stifling resistance to the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs.

Despite widespread hostility to this unprecedented assault, reflected in protest rallies by staff and students at many campuses, these attacks are continually deepening, as the NTEU isolates each struggle and opposes any unified political and industrial fight.

Ever more nakedly, Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s Liberal-National government and the university managements are exploiting the pandemic, just as all employers are, to restructure their operations to boost profits at the expense of workers.

Last December, in her annual report message, NTEU president Alison Barnes said it had been a successful year for the union, despite the loss of so many jobs. “Indeed, the union has grown even stronger,” she insisted, “building our workplace structures, increasing our workplace density, and strengthening our power.”

That “power” is solely concerned with retaining the union’s position as an industrial police force, keeping university workers straitjacketed by the anti-strike “Fair Work” laws drawn up by the unions and the last Labor government. New members may have joined the NTEU in the hope that it would defend their jobs, only to have those illusions dashed.

In the latest attack, hundreds of jobs are being targeted by the University of Sydney and the University of Technology, Sydney in their faculties of Arts and Social Sciences, especially in the schools of literature, art, linguistics, theatre and performance studies, which are so important to the development of culture and informed thinking. This dovetails with the government’s doubling of fees for humanities students, as part of a drive to further transform universities into vocational institutions

servicing the narrow needs of employers.

The NTEU’s suppression of resistance to the destructive process over the past year is not an aberration, nor a “mistake.” It flows from the union’s entirely pro-business program and corporatist partnership with the employers.

On April 30, the NTEU issued a media release welcoming an announcement by Education Minister Alan Tudge of a \$53.6 million support package for private international education providers, while saying it “did nothing” for public universities, which have also suffered sharp falls in international student enrolments.

“We welcome the fact that the government is finally recognising that the loss of international students has greatly affected the higher education sector, if only for the private providers, and acknowledge that for many providers, international student fees are most of their revenue,” Barnes said.

“In 2019 international students contributed \$40 billion to the Australian economy and was our fourth largest export industry. The Morrison government’s shortsightedness continues to threaten this valuable contribution.”

This is an explicit statement of support for the growing for-profit education business operations that successive governments, both Liberal-National and Labor Party, have cultivated while slashing funding for public education.

Education is regarded as a commodity fashioned to meet corporate dictates, not as an all-rounded and critical enlightenment—a basic social right for all young people. This transformation began under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments from 1983 to 1996, which reintroduced student fees and cut funding per student.

The NTEU media release underscores the union’s commitment to defending the lucrative profits that the public universities help generate for Australian capitalism

as a whole. “This valuable contribution” is reaped by sections of big business—such as migration and travel services, English language schools, accommodation companies and labour hire contractors—not university workers and students.

Over the past decade, international students have become cash cows, charged exorbitant fees, rents and other charges. Universities have increasingly relied on their share of these revenues to offset their worsening under-funding.

The NTEU bears direct responsibility for this crisis, having been an enthusiastic backer of the market-driven framework that has underpinned this process—the so-called Education Revolution imposed by the last Greens-backed Labor government of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard.

In 2007, the NTEU hailed the election of the Labor government, claiming that it would deliver a new progressive era of higher education after 11 years of Liberal-National cutbacks and attacks on the rights of students and university workers.

“The union looks forward to working with the new government to flesh out what the ‘Education Revolution’ means for universities,” the NTEU stated. It promoted Labor’s “recognition that universities have been significantly under-funded over the last decade, and the commitment to reverse this situation.”

In reality, Labor delivered chronic under-funding, ever-growing class sizes and workloads, and course closures and job cuts. By the time it lost office in an election landslide in 2013, Labor had stripped more than \$4 billion from university budgets—laying the basis for further cuts by the current Liberal-National government.

Labor’s “revolution” forced universities to constantly compete with each other to cut costs, and attract larger domestic and international student enrolments, especially in business-oriented courses, just to survive financially.

While Labor lifted limits on university enrolments, it tied all funding to student numbers and froze real funding per student. This made universities dependent on cramming more students into their campuses, but starved them of the necessary resources.

The “revolution” also accelerated the casualisation of the university workforces. The NTEU worked with university managements to give them the “flexibility” they demanded to be able to open and shut courses, semester by semester, to capture greater “market share.”

The NTEU signed repeated enterprise agreements allowing the employers to create new forms of casualised

teaching, more fixed-term contract positions and “teaching-only” academic roles. As a result, only 6.4 out of every 100 new positions created at Australian universities between 2009 and 2015 were tenured teaching or research jobs.

In all its pro-business handiwork, the NTEU is being assisted by pseudo-left groups, such as Socialist Alternative, Socialist Alliance and Solidarity, that falsely claim to be socialist. They echo Barnes in urging university workers to “build our workplace structures.” Many of their members and ex-members, like Barnes, have been integrated into the NTEU leadership, reflecting the privileged upper-middle-class base of these organisations.

Academics and other university staff, together with students, need to review these experiences, examine the NTEU’s record and make a political assessment. The clear lesson is that it is impossible to defend public education without a fundamental break with the NTEU, as well as Labor and the Greens.

What is necessary is the formation of rank-and-file committees of staff and students, completely independent of the unions, and a turn to other sections of workers in Australia and internationally facing a similar onslaught on jobs and conditions.

Such a struggle requires a socialist perspective, aimed at the total reorganisation of society in the interests of all, not the profits of the wealthy few. That includes providing the tens of billions of dollars needed to establish free, high quality education, from kindergarten to university, and the right of all education workers to full-time employment with decent pay and conditions.

This is the perspective of the Committee For Public Education, established by the Socialist Equality Party, as part of the fight for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. We urge all those who want to take forward this fight to contact the Committee for Public Education.



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