Australian pseudo-left groups try to shore up university unions' enterprise bargaining straitjacket

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8 June 2021

Under conditions in which university workers and students face historic and intensifying cuts to jobs and conditions, two pseudo-left groups are trying to help the trade unions to divert widespread opposition back into the same industrial framework that has facilitated the assault.

"NTEU Fightback," organised by Socialist Alternative, is urging National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members to seek supposedly better clauses in enterprise agreements with individual university managements, while Solidarity is calling on university workers to "work with" NTEU officials to "strengthen" the union.

This is the opposite of what is required. The need for a unified industrial and political struggle throughout the entire university sector against the cuts has never been greater. The Liberal-National government's May 11 federal budget deepened a decade of funding cuts, reducing allocations for public universities by a further 9.3 percent in real terms from 2021–22 to 2024–25.

That is on top of multi-billion-dollar cuts that began under the previous Greens-backed Labor government in 2012, and anticipated revenue losses of about $3.8 billion in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic's ongoing impact on enrolments by full fee-paying international students.

At the same time, the budget handed some $50 billion more to the corporate elite by way of subsidies and incentives and $44.6 billion for expanded military spending in preparation for war.

Far from launching any fight against the budget, the NTEU is attempting to keep university workers straitjacketed in the "enterprise bargaining" regime, which splits them into individual workplaces and ties them to the profit requirements of each management.

Last year, the NTEU admitted that it had presided over the destruction of up to 90,000 full-time, contract and casual jobs in the universities during 2020. In some cases, entire departments were shut down and formerly tenured academics with decades of expertise were forced to compete with each other for remaining positions.

This was despite anger among university workers, who forced the union to drop its initial "Job Protection Framework" which volunteered 15 percent pay cuts and still allowed for tens of thousands of sackings. Riding roughshod over this resistance, the NTEU pushed through individual deals at one university after another to achieve the cost savings demanded by managements.

All of this was permitted by the existing three-year enterprise agreements (EAs) approved by the NTEU in the last round of bargaining deals struck with university employers in 2018–19, or by imposing slight variations of them.

With these EAs expiring at most universities this year, NTEU Fightback issued a document, "Clauses worth fighting for," that urges union members to call for limited changes in particular EA clauses.

Over 44 pages and two appendixes, the document goes into microscopic detail about existing and suggested clauses in EAs. It reads like a briefing for union officials, which is what NTEU Fightback members aspire to become.

The entire thrust is to chain workers to the NTEU and other union apparatuses, which have stifled workers' struggles for decades, particularly since the Hawke and Keating Labor Party governments of 1983 to 1996. Labor used the unions as an industrial police force over the working class via a series of Accords, followed by the imposition of the EA system, which outlaws all industrial action outside "enterprise bargaining" periods.

One of the most revealing parts of NTEU Fightback's document is "Change/consultation clauses." It enthuses that the University of Sydney (USYD) EA requires multiple stages of consultation with the union over cuts to jobs and conditions. By contrast, the University of Melbourne (UoM) consultation process only requires written notices from the university, followed by written responses from staff.

NTEU Fightback passes over the fundamental component

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of both clauses that makes them essentially identical. That is, the consultation process, regardless of how long or detailed it is, does not determine the content, timing, or magnitude of any change proposals.

The UoM EA states, “there will be no power of veto over the University’s decision-making processes,” while the USYD EA states, “consultation does not necessarily mean that agreement will be reached.” The essence of both is unmistakable—management is under no obligation to even modify a proposal should staff oppose it.

For the union, however, the key difference is that USYD’s EA ensures the union not only has a seat at the table but is more intimately involved in implementing all change proposals, and cajoling members into accepting them.

Moreover, the NTEU Fightback clauses only oppose job cuts if they are supposedly “sham” or “forced” redundancies. Nor do the clauses forbid casual contracts, demanding the right of all university workers to secure work. Instead, they propose limited improvements such as introducing sick and holiday pay, raising the casual loading above 25 percent, paying casual academics for all hours worked, and increased entitlements at work like a guaranteed desk and laptop. These measures, even if agreed by individual universities, would still leave casuals depending on uncertain and under-paid employment, one semester at a time.

Similarly, NTEU Fightback suggests “controls” on outsourcing, such as requiring that all workers who perform work covered by the EA are paid the same rate, whether employed by the university or a private company. Its clauses “worth fighting for” do not prohibit outsourcing because that would be barred by the Fair Work Act, which was introduced by the last Labor government with the support of the unions.

On the ever-increasing staff workloads, NTEU Fightback advocates another avenue by which the union can partner with management. It proposes establishing joint committees of union and management representatives to negotiate workloads.

Again, the exemplar is USYD, which established a Workload Monitoring Committee in the previous EA, yet this has done nothing to resolve the crisis of overwork. NTEU Fightback admits: “Even close to the nominal expiry date of the Sydney EA, there are few real gains in workload to talk about.”

Likewise, the Solidarity group is working to try to bolster the discredited NTEU. It recently published an article by Marcus Banks, an NTEU delegate at RMIT University, who declared: “[A]ctivists need to learn to work with and against the officials, strengthening the union, and supporting the officials when they take a stand against university managements and the government.”

According to Banks, “activists” should build “rank-and-file networks” that can put pressure on the union officials, while “nurturing the strength of the union” and “raising the consciousness and capability to go beyond the officials if they will not act.”

Such “networks,” however, simply function as safety valves for the unions from the mounting discontent of workers and as vehicles for pseudo-left members to integrate themselves into the union hierarchy, just as their predecessors have done, such as NTEU national president Alison Barnes.

What is needed are genuine rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the thoroughly corporatised unions, fighting for a unified struggle against the bipartisan attack on public education and the underlying dictates of the wealthy corporate elite, whose fortunes have doubled during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The truth is that not one step forward can be taken within the framework of the anti-strike Fair Work legislation, which is policed by the unions and their pseudo-left backers. The fight to defend jobs and conditions requires a struggle against the entire political and corporate establishment. To wage this struggle, academics and professional staff need to turn to other sections of the working class who are facing similar attacks.

A recent joint online meeting of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) adopted a resolution that gave a lead to this struggle. It demanded that, instead of big business being bailed out with billions of dollars, and billions more being handed to 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, including casuals.

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