Australian unions oppose installation of chancellor at Newcastle University but support pro-business restructure

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Over the past month, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the University of Newcastle Students' Association (UNSA) have waged a cynical and diversionary campaign opposing the announcement that former National Party politician Mark Vaile was to become the new chancellor of the university in regional New South Wales.

The NTEU, the main academic union, and UNSA hailed management's recent withdrawal of the plans to install Vaile as a "victory" for University of Newcastle (UoN) students and staff. During their campaign, both had pointed to Vaile's record as deputy prime minister in the Howard Liberal-National Coalition government, which carried out significant attacks on tertiary education, and his subsequent career on the boards of several coal mining companies.

The proclamations of a "win" for students and staff are a sham. A sweeping, pro-business restructuring at the University of Newcastle is already well under way. The NTEU and UNSA are enforcing the destruction of hundreds of courses and permanent jobs, suppressing widespread opposition from students and staff, and collaborating closely with the current university executive. This assault will be intensified, whichever representative of the corporate elite is appointed chancellor, in line with a deepening of the attacks on tertiary education across the country.

At a rally held late last month, Luka Harrison, the president of UNSA stated that Vaile was "part of a government that gutted the higher education sector, slashed billions of dollars from higher education in this country. His government introduced voluntary student unionism which has gutted the student union movement in this country. It is an absolute shame that this university would consider him at all qualified to fill this position."

This is true. But the same could be said of the Labor Party, which the NTEU and UNSA support, and of which Harrison himself is a member. Labor governments abolished free university education and have spearheaded the corporatisation of the universities, including through billions of dollars in funding cuts.

Current Vice Chancellor Alex Zelinsky referenced this record in April, praising the "Education Revolution" of the Rudd-Gillard Labor governments, which were in office from 2007–2013, and their introduction of a "demand driven system." This fully opened universities to the forces of the market, forcing them to compete for enrollments to secure funding, and greatly heightening their reliance on international student fees. Gillard's Green-backed administration slashed $2.3 billion, in the largest cut to university funding in Australian history. UNSA held protests over Vaile's appointment, but has not organised a single event against the ongoing restructure. This is all the more striking given the scale of the overhaul. More than 200 full-time and professional jobs are on the chopping block and management is already scrapping or amalgamating 530 of the university's 2,200 courses.

While feigning outrage over Vaile's prospective appointment, the student association, has been more than happy to collaborate with the current administration chiefs. UNSA put on a series of "consultation meetings" with management in May, at which they provided management with a platform to promote the cuts to student audiences.

Harrison and other UNSA leaders shared platforms with university executives, including Zelinsky, a prominent political figure who has campaigned for the ever-greater subordination of universities to corporate interests. Zelinsky was also Australia's Chief Defence Scientist from 2012 to 2018, during which time he collaborated closely with Labor and Liberal-National governments, including on the expansion of ties between universities, the military and private weapons' developers.

The NTEU and UNSA campaign over Vaile was an attempt to cover-up their record of collaboration with management. It was also motivated by their concerns that Vaile, because of his political and corporate record, would not be the best face for the ongoing restructure and

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management-union offensive against staff and students.

This was spelled out by NTEU Newcastle branch president Dan Conway in a June 10 media statement, which declared: "I want to make it clear for those who are stating this a form of Liberal bashing that this has nothing to do with Mr Vaile's politics. Julie Bishop (Australian National University chancellor), who held similar roles in Liberal-National governments, is an appointment that I think most would be proud of. Ms Bishop, or someone like her, would come without all the baggage of Mr Vaile."

Conway warned that Vaile's appointment would not be appropriate, because "right now, our university is dealing with devastating and ill-considered staff cuts, and we will be reeling from those cuts for years to come." In other words, the union is willing to work with any representative of big business or member of a former government that has attacked the universities. They only ask that the individual selected not be likely to further provoke student and staff anger.

While issuing weasel-words of concern, the NTEU is fully on board with current restructure. Its main complaint has been that the cuts have not been "sufficiently justified to staff." This is coupled with appeals for greater "transparency" and collaboration between the unions and management. The union has ensured that the course cuts, already well under way, have proceeded without organised opposition, and has signaled its willingness to implement "cost reductions" in a new enterprise agreement that is still the subject of backroom discussion.

One of the union's objections to Vaile was that "questions" had been raised about his "suitability to oversee implementation of the University's own Strategic Plan." That statement, and others like it, demonstrate the union's tacit endorsement of the *Looking Ahead Strategic Plan 2020–2025*, adopted in early 2020. The document calls for the university to greatly expand its "partnerships" with different sectors of business, a program fully in line with the federal government's push to complete the transformation of universities into pipelines for the provision of labour and research to the major corporations.

One of the aims of these industry partnerships was spelled out in a September 2017 NSW parliamentary submission by University of Newcastle management.

The submission declared: "Increased collaboration with local, national and international industry on identified areas of growth and national priority is a key part of UON's overall strategy. Defence has been identified as an area with significant potential given its national focus and existing regional capability. As such, UoN is working to further its connections with Defence and Defence Industry and is actively consulting and engaging with stakeholders to develop new strategies to boost UON Defence participation."

In 2019, the university signed an agreement with Lockheed Martin, one of the world's largest weapons manufacturers. The deal with the arms company, whose products are implicated in major war crimes, serves to "support the development of tailored and targeted initiatives needed to develop the advanced defence industry technologies," i.e., weapons, and to cultivate a layer of young researchers who can help develop them. Similar partnerships, struck by universities across the country, are part of militarisation of the sector, bound up with the US and Australian preparations for war with China.

The University of Newcastle's partnership with Lockheed Martin is only the sharpest expression of the reactionary consequences of the current restructure and the broader assault on education. Just as they have lined-up behind the staff and course sackings, the NTEU and UNSA have done nothing to oppose the integration of the university into the war machine.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) club at the University of Newcastle is the only political tendency on campus fighting to mobilise students and staff against the union-enforced restructure and the subordination of the campus to the military and big business. The IYSSE fights for a unified movement of staff and pupils throughout the sector, in the struggle to guarantee permanent jobs, with decent conditions and pay for academics and university employees, and high-quality, free education for all as a fundamental social right.

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