

Australian university union suppresses debate to promote enterprise bargaining sham

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The New South Wales (NSW) state division of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), the main trade union covering university staff, held a supposed online “forum” last Friday.

The event provided a revealing picture of an organisation that is increasingly discredited in the eyes of university workers, and desperately trying to block any genuine debate about the historic and deepening government-management offensive against the jobs and conditions of staff and students.

Despite the event being billed as a statewide “forum,” NTEU members and all other staff participants were prevented from speaking. Even the chat function was disabled to make communication impossible between participants.

Any comments or questions that participants asked could be seen only by the union officials. Just a select few were read out, none of them critical of the union.

This takes to a new level the anti-democratic methods used by the NTEU, and all unions, for decades to push through “enterprise bargaining” agreements, which employers have readily used to attack workers’ wages and conditions, substantially casualise the workforce and turn the universities into businesses serving the requirements of the corporate elite.

While suppressing all discussion, the NTEU officials promoted the fraud that another round of union-management enterprise bargaining (negotiations at individual workplaces) could be used to reverse the mounting assault on university workers.

In reality, NTEU branches are proposing vague logs of claims that are designed to meet the escalating demands of managements. For example, the University of Sydney log calls for “enforceable protections against excessive work” without defining what is “excessive.” The purpose of these logs is to deepen the union’s relationship with management, as a new wave of attacks on university staff is implemented.

Members of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) demanded to know why the chat had been disabled. One

asked: “Are university workers not allowed to have open discussion?”

CFPE members denounced enterprise bargaining, and the NTEU’s attempt to cover up its part in opposing any unified struggle against the avalanche of job destruction since the COVID-19 pandemic began. “Why aren’t you telling workers the truth about the NTEU’s role?” one asked.

On casualisation, a member asked: “Why isn’t the union calling for staff to be made permanent and taking up a fight against insecure work?”

All these questions were blocked from view, and not answered, together with any other critical comments.

The main report, delivered by NSW NTEU division secretary Damien Cahill, claimed that enterprise bargaining was “our opportunity to start to build better universities.”

The truth is that, three decades ago, the Keating Labor government and the unions worked hand in glove to impose enterprise bargaining. Since then, it has been the main mechanism through which management and the unions have collaborated to implement the pro-market restructuring of the tertiary education sector.

Cahill began by underplaying the assault on university staff since the start of 2020, saying “thousands of university staff across the country have lost their jobs.” By the NTEU’s own estimates up to 90,000 jobs, counting those of casuals, were destroyed last year alone, and the job losses have continued this year. This level of job destruction is unprecedented in the Australian tertiary education sector.

This would not have been possible without the complicity of the NTEU. In May last year, after weeks of closed-door talks with employers, and without any consultation with members, the NTEU proposed a misnamed “job protection framework” that volunteered wages cuts of up to 15 percent and the destruction of up to 18,000 jobs.

Outraged responses by staff forced the employers and NTEU to withdraw the framework, but the union then bulldozed through deals with individual managements to achieve their cost-cutting demands. They used the various “change management” and “consultation” clauses in

enterprise agreements.

Cahill promoted union-management committees, “where staff can have a real say and ensure that our rights are being enforced.” But he failed to explain why the existing committees had failed to do that. The real purpose of these joint committees is to further integrate the union into the pro-business restructuring being carried out by governments and university administrations.

Speaking in the language of management, Cahill said the pandemic had exposed the “unsustainable funding model at the heart of universities,” but did not elaborate.

In 2013, the last Labor Party federal government cut university funding by \$2.3 billion. This was the final instalment of Labor’s “education revolution,” which the NTEU fully supported.

Universities turned to full fee-paying international students to stay afloat. Managements now claim that the loss of international student enrolments, since the pandemic began, requires fundamental restructuring measures. In fact, this has only accelerated the assault on tertiary education.

Cahill left the door open to continuing casualisation, stating that casual contracts should be used, “only when the work is genuinely casual in nature.”

As the NTEU constantly does, Cahill reiterated the anti-strike clauses of the Fair Work legislation, stating: “Union members, and only union members, also have the right to take protected industrial action in pursuit of a new enterprise agreement, should that be necessary.” These laws were implemented by the Rudd Labor government in 2009, with the full support of the unions.

Cahill repeatedly called on participants to join the NTEU. But why join an organisation that censors its members and suppresses opposition to restructuring?

The CFPE is fighting for the establishment of a network of rank-and-file committees, to unify staff and students against the cuts, and to link up with workers nationally and internationally. CFPE members were blocked from putting the following resolution to the NTEU forum:

That this meeting:

1. Rejects the management-union “enterprise bargaining” process as nothing but a decades-old vehicle for imposing further pro-business restructuring and cuts to jobs and conditions at universities across the country.

2. Gives full support to the campaign taken up by students against the retrenchment of much-appreciated educators and devastating course cuts at Macquarie, Monash, La Trobe, Adelaide and the University of Western Australia, and undertakes to broaden their fight across the country and internationally.

3. Condemns the supposed “resounding success” secured by the NTEU at the University of Queensland, which

involved convincing five academics to take “voluntary redundancies,” thus allowing management to implement its cost-cutting and suppress resistance to its original “spill and fill” plan to axe two jobs.

4. Opposes and rejects the NTEU’s proposals for similar processes of consultation and appeals at other universities, which likewise serve only to block any actual fight against the jobs onslaught and pro-business restructuring.

5. Calls for a unified struggle by university staff and students against the offensive by government and management, who are exploiting the worsening global COVID-19 disaster to accelerate years of the transformation of universities into increasingly casualised businesses, servicing the narrow vocational and research requirements of the corporate elite, at the expense of genuine education. The continued pandemic crisis has resulted from the capitalist drive to reopen the economy and is not the fault of educators, who should not be made to pay for it.

6. Demands that, instead of big business being bailed out with billions of dollars, and billions more being handed to the military to prepare for war, 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 secure jobs for all university workers.

7. Calls for the establishment of rank-and-file action committees of tertiary education workers and students—independent of the NTEU, governments and employers. These are essential to (1) organise a unified struggle against the destruction of jobs and basic rights, (2) protect university staff and students from unsafe COVID-19 conditions and (3) link up with workers internationally who are facing similar critical struggles against the impact of the worsening global capitalist crisis.



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