

Pseudo-left and Labor promote unions, oppose socialist perspective at University of Sydney meeting

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Members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) intervened in a meeting of over 200 students at the University of Sydney last week called to oppose cuts at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, the Business School, and School of Dentistry. The joint pseudo-left/Labor run meeting's real purpose was to promote the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) while providing no perspective for students to fight the cuts.

The meeting culminated in a rushed attempt to push through a motion stating opposition to the cuts, restructuring and casual job losses. It concluded with a declaration that those present would:

- To stand in solidarity with staff if they choose to strike during their Enterprise Bargaining Period and support the NTEU's log of claims.
- To commit to building a mass campaign against all university cuts.
- To support the No USyd Cuts campaign.

Anxious to prevent any discussion, the joint chairs, Eddie Stephenson, a member of Socialist Alternative, and Lia Perkins, a Student Representative Council welfare officer, read out the resolution and immediately asked if there was any dissent, giving student's next to no time to consider the motion. A member of the CFPE and IYSSE both said they dissented in the meeting chat and the CFPE member was given one and a half minutes to speak.

The CFPE member said that while they agree with the resolution's stated opposition to restructuring and the university's alignment with the military, "what the resolution doesn't make clear at all is the manner in which this is to be opposed."

He said that the unification of staff and students was undermined by the resolution's call for solidarity with the NTEU, because the union "has been collaborating with management for the past few decades as well as from the beginning of the pandemic.

The speaker referred to the proposal by the NTEU national leadership last May, behind the backs of union members, for

wage cuts of up to 15 percent and 10,000 job losses. When the national framework was rejected by the major universities, for fear the NTEU could not enforce it, the union proceeded to strike deals that contained similar cuts, with individual university managements. The unity of staff and students, the CFPE representative stated, "has to be taken up outside of the NTEU."

The basis for a mass campaign against the cuts must be a rejection of the foundation of the attacks, which the CFPE member said, "is the linking of research to business and of education to the market. That means the taking up of a socialist perspective, which this resolution doesn't raise at all." A recent EY report made clear the agenda being implemented when it called for the transformation of universities into corporate vocational and research services and proclaimed the "death" of higher education.

Perkins asked if there was anyone who wished to respond, but none of the meeting organisers or pseudo-left members raised their hand. Zach Diotte, president of the IYSSE club at Western Sydney University (WSU), called for further discussion on the points made by the CFPE member. He was told by Roisin Murphy, a Labor Party staffer and vice president of the SRC, "You're not a USyd student, you're unable to call for that."

One student called for an amendment to the resolution, stating in the chat, "[I] like the motion in principle but the expression of solidarity wit[h] NTEU is unnecessary. I think we should express solidarity with casual and professional staff." She was ignored.

The vote was conducted and declared passed and then time given for contributions, again capped at one and a half minutes.

Diotte spoke, explaining, "What we're dealing with [at WSU] is nothing different to what is going on at USYD. Around 300 staff were lost last year, and this was called a victory by the union."

Diotte said the unions have "become integrated with capitalism, they can't be relied on anymore." Staff at Macquarie University have been given "impossible workloads that were passed by the NTEU," he said. "The union hasn't opposed these cuts at all," instead they have called for the

redundancies to be “clarified,” facilitating the job losses.

Compelled to respond, Stephenson attempted to defend the NTEU but did not address the record of the union presented by the CFPE and IYSSE speakers.

Stephenson said that the motion passed by the meeting was “to stand in solidarity with the NTEU, which is the union that organises staff members at this university.” The NTEU was “hopefully” organising “towards industrial action” as part of the current negotiations with management for a new Enterprise Agreement for improved wages and conditions. Stephenson said she does not “swear off the union” because it contains “really important activists who are doing really good work.”

The “activists” Stephenson is referring to are members of Socialist Alternative, who have fought through the NTEU Fightback union sub-group to prevent any break among staff from the NTEU after the mass outrage at the union’s proposed wage and job cuts last year. NTEU Fightback has fully endorsed the NTEU’s log of claims that commits the union to nothing while integrating itself more fully with management’s restructuring.

NTEU representative Catherine Sutton-Brady attempted to defend the role of the union, claiming that the branch did not support the cuts advanced by the NTEU national leadership. This is a cynical argument because although the vast majority of NTEU members, and non-NTEU staff were deeply hostile to the leadership’s national framework, to the point where it had to be abandoned, the branch leaderships either tried to enforce it, or found other ways of working with management to implement the restructuring measures. Sutton-Brady’s contribution at the start of the meeting made clear that the branch leadership at USYD did the latter.

Under a new Draft Change Proposal, workers in the Business School’s Research Services Office are being subject to a “spill and fill” operation in which, “all these people are being told that their jobs are gone, and they have to apply for new jobs,” said Sutton-Brady. The most frustrating aspect, she said, was the university’s consultation process. Staff and the union have provided detailed feedback to management explaining their opposition to the cuts, but the Revised Change Proposal has no revisions because management has simply “ignored all the feedback they got.”

What Sutton-Brady left out is that the union endorsed the university’s consultation process in the previous 2019 Enterprise Agreement, which clearly states that “consultation does not necessarily mean that agreement will be reached.” So, while Sutton-Brady complains about management ignoring worker’s opposition to cuts, she defends those who created the conditions which has made this possible.

This is not a mistake. Prior to the start of the latest bargaining round, NTEU Fightback lauded USYD’s consultation process as the “best in the country.” This is because the aim of the union and their hangers on is not to oppose the restructuring but to be “consulted” on how best to

implement it.

The student general meeting again exposed Socialist Alternative and the pseudo-left as the most determined defenders of the unions, which are an industrial police force of corporate managements and the government.

Socialist Alternative insisted that the only way forward for students was a single-campus campaign, aimed at “pressuring” management, within the framework of union enterprise bargaining. This perspective, which presents the assault on education as the product of individual administrators, serves to cover-up the bipartisan responsibility of Liberal-National and Labor governments for the onslaught on higher education, and the unions for enforcing it. The thin gruel of protest politics is directed against a unified movement of students and staff across Australia and internationally and facilitated one round of cuts after another.

Socialist Alternative’s close collaboration with Labor, including their joint opposition to the discussion of a socialist perspective, demonstrates the real character of the pseudo-left. While they may occasionally use socialist phraseology, they are hostile to the fight for an independent political movement of the working class, and function as adjuncts of Labor and the unions. The pseudo-left speaks for an affluent layer of the upper-middle-class that is itself increasingly integrated into the union officialdom.

The failure of the Socialist Alternative and Labor representatives to answer the points raised by the CFPE and IYSSE speakers underscores their political bankruptcy. Defending the NTEU, an organisation that has presided over the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs in the past year, meeting organisers could only resort to bureaucratic suppression of discussion.

The perspective advanced by the IYSSE, the CFPE and the Socialist Equality Party—for a rebellion against the unions and the formation of independent rank-and-file committees of students and staff—is the only way a struggle to defend public education can be organised. Such committees would unify educators and pupils at universities across the country and freely discuss a socialist perspective that places social need, including high-quality, free public education and secure jobs for all staff, above corporate profit and government austerity programs.



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