

Australian university union holds farcical online “sit-in” over casualisation

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In a failed bid to appear to be conducting a fight against the worsening casualisation of Australian universities, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) held a 12-hour online “sit-in” on November 15.

Nominally, it was a protest against the decision by University of Newcastle (UoN) management in September to offer just six casual workers an option to take permanent positions, out of 2,300 casual staff members.

This was not a sit-in in any real sense. Staff members were asked to participate from their own computers, some at home, and none during work hours. That was so that the event did not constitute industrial action, which is illegal under the anti-strike Fair Work laws drafted by the last Labor government and the trade unions.

Only a select number of staff members were provided with the link to participate in the Zoom call. Others who wished to take part could merely type comments on a Facebook livestream. At 1 pm approximately 34 people were viewing the livestream, and that dropped to 14 during the main featured speakers, who included NTEU president Alison Barnes and Australian Council of Trade Unions secretary Sally McManus.

The small audience for this farcical production further revealed the union’s loss of support among university workers since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. That was when the NTEU offered the employers a deal that effectively gave them the green light for unprecedented job destruction, resulting in the loss of up to 90,000 permanent and casual jobs over the past 18 months.

The UoN management’s contemptuous rejection of nearly all permanency applications followed changes to industrial relations laws enacted in March by the

Liberal-National Coalition government. Despite less than 2 percent of university casual workers being offered permanent roles nationally, according to the NTEU, the “sit-in” was confined to UoN.

About 10 of the 12 hours were dedicated to reading out the rejection letters that management had sent to individual casual employees. None of those affected were allowed to speak—just recite the management correspondence.

The letters stated that the rejections are based on the new laws, as well as provisions in the UoN enterprise agreement agreed to by the NTEU. They routinely declared that “you have not worked a regular pattern of hours on an ongoing basis for the six-month period” or “your conversion will result in the university being required by its enterprise agreement to provide you with duties such as research or scholarly activities that it does not need or require you to perform.”

Members of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) intervened to object. One wrote: “The fact that there has been no discussion in this sit-in about organising university workers and students to fight for full-time permanent and secure jobs for all, is another indication that the union is not going to take up any fight against the assault on university workers’ conditions.

“The CFPE has been fighting for educators across the country to take these struggles into their own hands on a socialist program and perspective, independent of the trade unions, who have overseen the casualisation of the workforce and destruction of conditions.”

Speakers attempted to present the Labor Party and the Greens as defenders of education ahead of the federal election next year. Barnes linked the event to the election, saying the government “can’t ignore this issue any longer,” tacitly calling for a vote for Labor and the

Greens.

Labor Senator Tony Sheldon, an ex-union bureaucrat, promoted a parliamentary committee recommendation that governments, universities, experts and the NTEU “design a proper system of casual and fixed term conversion.” The report’s vague language accepts continued casual employment, only calling for “opportunities” for conversion.

Sheldon’s remarks dovetail with Labor’s bid to present itself as the best vehicle for a further pro-business restructuring of university education. At an education summit hosted by the *Australian Financial Review* in August, shadow education minister Tanya Plibersek called for “consensus” between big business, the federal government, and the unions to “help university reform stick.” That was in line with a recent EY corporate consultancy report on the “death” of higher education.

Mehreen Faruqi, the Greens spokesperson on education, was allowed to posture as a defender of “free education.” She complained that “access to the privilege of education is being sold at a higher and higher price.”

The Greens’ historical record demonstrates the hypocrisy of these statements. From 2010 to 2013 this party formed a de facto coalition government with Labor, which cut university funding by \$2.7 billion after imposing a “demand-driven system” that ties funding directly to enrolments.

McManus said universities have “systematically converted jobs that were once permanent” into casual contracts, “because the laws allow them to do so.” She did not mention the fact that ACTU helped draft Labor’s Fair Work laws and that union-negotiated enterprise agreements have placed virtually no restraints on the employers’ ability to hire casuals.

The ACTU leader unwittingly provided an indictment of her own role. She complained that “unions spent six months in negotiations with government last year... talking to employers about why the laws need to change,” but “they would not agree to very sensible proposals.”

This highlights the ACTU’s own response to the pandemic. It quickly went into closed-door talks with the government while holding back industrial action by the working class over the wholesale axing of jobs and conditions. As a result of this tight collaboration, the

then industrial relations minister, Christian Porter, hailed McManus as his “BFF” (best friend forever).

A CFPE member posted in the Facebook chat McManus’s record of telling employers in April 2020 they could “get everything you want” from the unions. In a typical display of the NTEU’s constant efforts to silence criticism, Sharlene Leroy-Dyer, a former NTEU branch committee member, replied: “Why are you here Jack, obviously not in solidarity so FO.”

The event provided another demonstration that no struggle can or will be mounted by the NTEU, Labor or the Greens against the ongoing devastation of university staff and student conditions. A complete break from these forces is required. Independent rank-and-file committees are needed, as called for by the CFPE and the Socialist Equality Party, in order to mount a broad struggle of all educators in alliance with students and the working class as a whole.



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