

Sydney University meeting highlights union's role in blocking opposition to reopening of Australian campuses

Our correspondents
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A union branch meeting at the University of Sydney last Monday provided a revealing picture of how the trade unions are trying to stifle working-class opposition, including among educators and students, to the reopening of campuses, schools and other workplaces amid soaring COVID-19 infections.

Across Australia, university managements are moving to resume face-to-face classes, or have already done so, despite the country's high levels of infections and deaths. This has nothing to do with the education or welfare of students. It is a spearhead in the broader "let it rip" offensive being waged by the corporate elite and its governments, both in Australia and internationally.

International students are being flown into Australia and offered visa fee refunds and allowed to work full-time. That is, in order to shore up university finances, boost revenues in tertiary education—one of Australia capitalism's most lucrative industries—and exploit the students as cheap labour.

Aware of widespread concern among university workers and students, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) branch committee called the January 31 meeting to propose a motion that supports the efforts of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) to facilitate returns to workplaces by appealing to employers to produce "risk mitigation" plans in partnership with the unions.

The motion asked management to agree to a series of vague requests, such as that staff who did not wish to return to campus and "whose work cannot practicably be done from home" should be given alternative duties.

Rooms should have "minimum ventilation standards," there should be mask-wearing "indoors when working with others" and management-supplied

rapid antigen tests (RATs).

The motion employed the language of management itself. It said the two-year experience of the pandemic showed that "Covid responses involve trade-offs between costs and benefits" and "these trade-offs need to be carefully assessed."

What the pandemic has actually demonstrated is the readiness of the capitalist elite to sacrifice the health and lives of millions of working people, the elderly and children in order to reap the "benefits" of soaring profits and wealth.

To head off calls for a unified fight by staff and students to stop the dangerous campus reopening, the motion concluded: "If management fails to meet these demands we reserve the right to recommend to members not to return to campus, on the basis that doing so would be unsafe."

As the discussion at the meeting showed, there are real fears among staff members about being exposed, along with students, family members and the wider community, to infections that could have potentially fatal or long-term health consequences.

Among the amendments moved by members were for management to guarantee access to N95 masks, to conduct regular on-campus testing, and to check the vaccination status of people entering the campus.

Concerns were raised also about the poor ventilation in buildings where air-conditioning breakdowns commonly occur and windows cannot be opened. One chat comment objected: "Very inadequate on ventilation. Where is the purchase of HEPA filter purifiers even?" There was no answer from the committee.

The NTEU committee's central preoccupation was to

block discussion on an opposed resolution moved by a supporter of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), calling for a joint stand by staff and students nationally and internationally against the deadly “live with the virus” program being imposed by capitalist governments.

That resolution began by stating: “That this meeting opposes any return to campus amid the Omicron disaster and urges all university workers and students to fight for joint strikes and walkouts to force an immediate return to remote learning, in order to prevent mass COVID outbreaks.”

The CFPE motion said the country’s governments, Labor Party and Liberal-National alike, were responsible for unfettered Omicron transmission, and pointed to the serious outbreaks occurring in universities across the US.

The branch committee insisted that the CFPE motion would not be discussed unless the committee’s resolution was defeated, and that the hour-long meeting would be devoted to discussing and taking amendments on it.

Speaking against the NTEU motion, university worker Zac Hambides, who had submitted the CFPE resolution, said COVID was an airborne virus, which meant there was no safe way to re-open schools and universities during high levels of infection. “Masks, vaccines, ventilation are all important measures but cannot be implemented effectively on a mass scale to ensure people are safe,” he said.

Hambides warned the meeting: “The NTEU resolution will result in increased infections and illness among academics, staff, students, their families and the working class more broadly. As a result of the position taken by the branch committee, the NTEU national office and the ACTU, people will die.”

In an attempt to counter these remarks, a member of Socialist Alternative, a pseudo-left group, spoke to shore up support for the NTEU motion. She claimed to “agree with a lot of points from the previous speaker” and could not personally agree to a return to campus yet but could “still support the motion.”

She moved an amendment that “management should not force us to return to on-campus work with current very high levels of infection.” That amendment was overwhelmingly passed, reflecting the extent of the opposition to returning to face-to-face classes and other

physical worksites.

Like the NTEU motion as a whole, however, it leaves staff members to fight management return-to-campus demands as individuals. NTEU branch president Nick Riemer declared that the amendment was “in keeping with the spirit” of the committee’s motion.

Before the meeting even started, the committee had engaged in political censorship. It refused to circulate the CFPE motion’s final section, which urged staff and students to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to fight for a shutdown of non-essential production, with full compensation for workers, and online learning for the schools and universities.

In an email, Riemer informed Hambides that these calls were “incompatible” with the union’s rules, which confined it to protecting the interests of trade unionists. That rejects any broader fight to protect the interests of students, other workers and the wider population in Australia and globally.

This epitomises the role of trade unions, which seek to straitjacket workers within the narrow confines of seeking agreements with employers over the terms of continuing the wage labour needed to ensure profitable operations.

With the help of the pseudo-left amendment, the NTEU motion was ultimately agreed by about 60 of the 80 or so attendees, with 4 against and 2 recorded abstentions.

Members of the CFPE and the International Student for Social Equality (IYSSE) are campaigning for university workers and students to oppose any return to campus during the Omicron disaster and to form rank-and-file committees to link up with the international development of strikes, student walkouts and protests.

Such a movement needs to be part of a broader struggle in Australia and internationally for the elimination of the virus and for a socialist perspective, aimed at reorganising society to meet the needs of working people, not the profit demands of the financial elite.



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