

Australian university union blocks debate on dangerous reopening of campuses

Our reporters
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At a national webinar last Friday, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) prevented discussion about university workers and students being forced back onto unsafe campuses as the deadly Omicron wave of COVID-19 continues in Australia and internationally.

The NTEU's stand was encapsulated in the webinar title, which was "Returning to campus safely." The premature reopening of campuses, as part of the "let it rip" policy of every government, was presented as a fait accompli that university workers could not fight.

There is widespread concern among staff and students about the infections that will be spread, with potentially life-threatening, or Long-COVID consequences, by cramming students into classrooms and other campus venues, such as libraries.

Opening the webinar, NTEU national president Alison Barnes said nearly 2,000 union members had registered for the event. It was an "overwhelming response." Many questions were submitted in advance, evidently raising outright objections to the reopening or to the lack of essential safety measures, such as vaccination checks, infection tests, N95 masks and adequate building ventilation.

Fearing expressions of opposition, the NTEU barred debate and questions from the audience. Despite the pretence of having a "hand raised" button to speak, no one was permitted to do so. No chat function was provided to allow comments or information to challenge the union's line.

After initially saying questions could be asked, "if we get through all those submitted," Barnes shut down the hour-long webinar several minutes early, in order to ensure that none could be raised.

The questions submitted beforehand were not directly answered either. None were read out. Instead, they were bundled into categories and briefly dispensed with by NTEU national assistant secretary Gabe Gooding.

Among the questions that went unanswered was one by Michael Head, a Western Sydney University educator and Socialist Equality Party (SEP) member. His question was: "Why is the NTEU allowing the dangerous reopening of campuses?"

Head's question explained: "Reopening campuses is not motivated by concerns for students' education quality or wellbeing. It is driven by education industry profit-making and university revenues, especially from international students.

"It is also part of a broader agenda. The federal, state and territory governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, are imposing a 'live with the virus' program of ongoing infection, disease and death for the sake of corporate profit."

In a presentation, Gooding urged university workers to accept the framework of Work Health Safety (WHS) laws, which only require employers to eliminate or reduce health risks "as far as reasonably practicable."

According to Gooding, these "reasonable" steps can consist of providing pandemic leave for infected staff, encouraging vaccination, providing for rapid antigen testing, requiring masking, setting occupancy limits and improving ventilation and cleaning. These measures are no guarantee against mass infection, and many managements are refusing to organise them anyway.

Under WHS laws, employers are supposed to conduct "risk assessments" and "consult" with employees before taking decisions that affect safety. In reality, most university managements have announced reopening plans without consultation, except with NTEU officials in some instances.

Gooding insisted that university workers must take no independent action, outside the union's control, to refuse to return to campus or work in unsafe conditions. One of her PowerPoint slides featured the word "never" in red letters: "Never refuse to comply with a management

directive without checking with us first.”

Gooding said the WHS laws permitted workplace health and safety representatives (HSRs) to halt work in a location or issue provisional improvement notices (PINs) to require improvements if conditions breached WHS laws. But these representatives had to first undergo an approved five-day training course.

Dom Rowe, the NTEU national director of campaigns and organising, told the webinar the union had won concessions at some universities. For example, at Sydney’s Macquarie University, casuals would have paid leave if infected, and ventilation would be reviewed in consultation with the NTEU.

Such minimal measures will not prevent infections in the first place. These “wins” are a means of justifying the union’s overall imposition of the return to campuses.

At an NTEU branch meeting at Macquarie University a day earlier, the union cited these “improvements” to push through a branch committee resolution to accept the reopening, provided only that the union could take unstated “action” if HSRs decided that conditions breached WHS regulations.

During that meeting, however, many concerns were voiced. In response to the promised payment for casuals if they contracted COVID, one said in the chat: “As a casual ... I’d rather not get Covid than be compensated after the fact.” Another member stated: “WE SHOULD BE ONLINE FOR NOW.” One asked: “Is there any advice on what we can do if students refuse to wear masks? Do we just end the class?”

An educator commented: “I am convening a unit that does not have any online classes. Students have asked for that, and the response has been that we need to manage blended synchronous offerings, even though we do not have the necessary training or technical support for this.”

Chris Gordon, a member of the SEP and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), opposed the NTEU motion. He pointed out: “COVID is an airborne virus which means there is no safe way to re-open schools and universities. Masks, vaccines, ventilation are all important measures but cannot be implemented effectively on a mass scale to ensure people are safe. Instead, what is required is to shut down non-essential industries, like education, with full compensation to all workers and small business owners.”

The NTEU motion was passed, but 10 percent of the attendees voted against or abstained. The branch president then refused to put to the meeting Gordon’s alternative resolution to oppose “any return to campus amid the

Omicron disaster” and urge “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.”

At Western Sydney University, the NTEU went even further to prevent debate, despite management reporting that nearly 800 staff and students had contracted COVID during the pandemic so far. The branch committee refused to hold a meeting to discuss the campus reopening, instead telling members by email last week: “We believe the overall approach taken by Senior Management is generally reasonable.”

That “reasonable” approach includes a full return to face-to-face classes, with online learning only provided “if possible,” no organised testing and no guarantee of safe ventilation, especially in older and high-rise buildings and those with recurring air-conditioning problems and no opening windows. Working from home will be permitted two days a week, but only if supervisors agree and “business continuity” is ensured.

During an NTEU branch meeting last Friday to report on enterprise bargaining talks with management (with virtually no progress made), members raised anxieties about these issues, and the lack of protection for immunocompromised, asthmatic or otherwise vulnerable staff and students.

However, the branch president declared it was “not in our power” to tell management not to reopen. The committee refused to circulate an opposed SEP-CFPE resolution and delayed it being moved until three minutes before the meeting ended, making a mockery of democratic discussion.

SEP and CFPE members are urging staff and students to form independent rank-and-file committees to oppose the NTEU’s support for the perilous reopening of campuses and link up with the educators’ strikes, student walkouts and protests internationally. For discussion contact the CFPE.

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