

# Australian academics union censors SEP member at University of Sydney strike

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In a revealing incident during a two-day strike of University of Sydney (USYD) workers last week, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) branch president, Nick Riemer, prevented a striking staff member from addressing fellow workers during a rally due to the staff member's politics.

The staff member, Zac Hambides, who is also a member of the Committee for Public Education, and the Socialist Equality Party, asked Riemer to be allowed to address the rally but was refused and told, "I have made a political decision." When Hambides asked Riemer to elaborate, he said, "I don't want to have this discussion now," and walked away.

Riemer's actions were an egregious act of political censorship. The most elementary right of striking workers, who had voted for the stoppage and were participating in it, is to be able to discuss freely among one another. Instead, Riemer arrogated to himself the "right" to dictate what issues striking staff could and could not raise, based on his unstated "political decision."

The censorship is typical of the corporatised trade unions, which function as a political police force of management, including at the universities. It is particularly notable, given that Riemer is associated with the pseudo-left Solidarity organisation, which occasionally claims to be socialist.

He clearly feared that Hambides would expose the fraudulent character of the strike organised by the union, and the entire enterprise bargaining agreement process of which it is a part.

The university management is demanding that the next agreement include sweeping changes to academic workloads clearing the way for a major transformation of the university.

Specifically, all research is to be controlled by heads of faculty, and the university is seeking to formally abolish the 40/40/20 workload division for academics. Their time is split between teaching for 40 percent, research for 40 percent, and administration for 20 percent. For most academics, their onerous teaching and administrative burdens make the

40/40/20 split a thing of the past.

USYD's demands tie in with the requirements of big business. In August last year, EY (formerly Ernst & Young) published a paper pronouncing in all-caps, "HIGHER EDUCATION IS DEAD. LONG LIVE THE KNOWLEDGE SERVICES SECTOR!" It outlined a proposal in which all university research is either directly requested by business, or is aimed at meeting immediate business needs.

The abolition of the 40/40/20 restrictions would serve these ends, by allowing faculty leaderships to direct greater research into areas demanded by business. It would also pave the way for a further expansion of casual labour in the field of teaching.

The USYD NTEU's log of claims does nothing to oppose this pro-market agenda but rather seeks to instead integrate the union into it. The log calls for undefined "protections" against excessive workloads, and a pay rise of only 4 percent, well below the increased cost of living for non-discretionary items, which rose by at least 6.6 percent in the past year.

The main purpose of the union's log of claims is to develop more union/management committees on the pretext of controlling excessive workload allocation. In practice, such committees would involve backroom collaboration aimed at implementing management demands and keeping a lid on opposition.

In holding the strike, the NTEU at USYD is attempting to present the illusion that the branch is waging a struggle against management's agenda. The implication is that the USYD branch is somehow different to other branches and particularly the NTEU national leadership, which became utterly discredited in the eyes of workers after offering university managements across the country a wage cut of up to 15 percent and tens of thousands of job cuts at the start of the pandemic.

This charade has already been exposed. At a USYD NTEU branch meeting this week, Riemer reported that after the two-day strike, "management gave no ground whatsoever on our

key issues.” Despite this he proclaimed that the strike was “hugely successful” and encouraged workers to participate in the next one-day stoppage due on May 24, to place pressure on management.

This is an utterly bankrupt program. The union has now had 15 six-hour sessions with management since the last agreement expired in June 2021. According to John Buchanan of the union bargaining committee, the only “concrete achievements” from all this have been the inclusion of “gender affirmation” leave and other leave types into worker’s already existing allotment of “personal leave.”

The USYD branch leadership’s attempts to subordinate staff to its backroom horsetrading with management, are entirely in keeping with the union’s national program. For the past two years, as it has presided over tens of thousands of job cuts, the union has divided staff up, campus by campus, enforcing one sell-out deal after another.

The more the NTEU is exposed, the more Riemer and other pseudo-left elements are attempting to suppress criticism of the union while putting forward phony radical rhetoric.

While Riemer prevented Hambides from speaking, Deaglan Godwin, a student member of the USYD Education Action Group and of Socialist Alternative, the main pseudo-left group active on campus, was one of the opening speakers. Godwin heaped praise on the NTEU at USYD, which he claimed, “has a proud tradition of militant pickets,” of “defending” its strikes and, “that is what other unions need to learn.”

In reality, the NTEU at USYD has pushed through a series of regressive enterprise agreements over the past decade, consolidating the university’s position as one of the most corporatised in the country and a testing ground for attacks at other campuses.

Politically, the strike and associated rally were aimed at bolstering the fraud that Labor and the Greens represent a lesser-evil to the Liberal-Nationals in today’s federal election. In addition to Hambides, Max Boddy, a Socialist Equality Party candidate for the New South Wales (NSW) Senate, was also prevented from addressing the striking workers.

However, Greens NSW Senate candidate David Shoebridge was paraded around the pickets by the NTEU as a supposed defender of education. SEP members pointed out to striking workers that the Greens were in a de facto coalition with the former Gillard Labor government as it introduced billions of dollars in cuts to higher education, and forced universities to compete with one another for enrolments.

Adam Bandt, current leader of the Greens, has made clear

that his party is seeking to form another alliance with Labor after the May 21 elections. Such a government would only deepen the pro-market onslaught on public education initiated by the Hawke-Keating Labor governments in the 1980s and 90s, and deepened by every subsequent administration, Labor and Liberal-National.

University staff should reject the NTEU’s political censorship, which is an attack on the rights of workers themselves. Combined with the promotion of the Greens, the attack on political discussion among striking staff is a clear warning that a sell-out is being prepared.

What is necessary is the establishment of rank-and-file committees, independent of the NTEU, at all universities. This is a first step in breaking the isolation imposed by the union, and developing a unified industrial and political struggle of academics and staff at campuses across the country and internationally.

Above all, what is required is the socialist perspective that the NTEU sought to censor. The hundreds of billions being allocated to the military and to big business, in the form of handouts and tax breaks for big business and the wealthy, must be redirected to meet social need, including to education and healthcare.

This poses the need for a struggle aimed at establishing a workers’ government that would implement socialist policies, including placing the banks and the corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control. That is the only means of ending the rampant corporatisation of higher education, which has been enforced by Labor, the Greens and the trade unions.

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