Australian university union again censors socialist worker during a strike

Jack Turner
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In what has become a blatant pattern of political censorship, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) branch president at the University of Sydney (USYD), Nick Riemer, has now three times blocked a staff member from speaking to fellow workers because he is a socialist.

The university worker, Zac Hambides, is a member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE). He has sought to oppose the isolation imposed by the NTEU on the workers at the university, who have held three days of strikes to fight against real wage cuts.

While the political ban was directed against Hambides, who was on strike himself, it sets a precedent for use against any striking NTEU member who oppose the union's sellouts.

Hambides has attempted to expose the fact that the NTEU's enterprise bargaining log of claims is primarily aimed at establishing more union-management committees to integrate the union into management's restructuring agenda, not to oppose it.

The union's wage claim is 4 percent per year, which is a real wage cut compared to inflation. As for the NTEU's call for undefined "protections" against excessive workloads, that commits the union to nothing in any union-management committee.

In the most anti-democratic fashion, Riemer, a supporter of the pseudo-left Solidarity group, has attempted to silence this and any other criticism of the union. The NTEU has a long record of selling out university workers' struggles and straitjacketing its members in the enterprise bargaining laws, which prohibit all industrial action except for union-controlled bargaining periods.

The NTEU took its betrayals to a new level by helping managements impose thousands of job cuts nationally during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, many universities posted record surpluses in 2021, including a huge $1.05 billion surplus at USYD.

On May 11, during the first day of a two-day strike, Riemer told Hambides he had "made a political decision" not to allow Hambides to address a rally of fellow striking workers at the picket.

Riemer also prevented Max Boddy, a New South Wales Senate candidate for the SEP in the recent federal election, from speaking, on the fraudulent basis that no political parties were permitted to address the rally. By contrast, Riemer allowed a member of another pseudo-left group, Socialist Alternative, to speak in false praise of the NTEU as having a "militant tradition."

One week later at a USYD branch union members' meeting Hambides objected to his censorship during the strike and began outlining the remarks he had been intending to make, but was cut off by Riemer.

On May 24, during a second one-day stoppage, Riemer again blocked Hambides from addressing striking workers, flatly declaring: "You're not speaking." When Hambides objected, Riemer interrupted the person who was addressing the rally at the time and called for a show of hands to indicate who would like to hear Hambides speak.

Despite a number of hands being raised, Riemer declared the rushed vote lost. When Hambides then attempted to speak, Riemer shouted over him using a megaphone.

In a further revealing act, a member of Socialist Alternative, which actively attempts to keep workers straightjacketed to the union, came up to Hambides and told him that the union could not allow all workers to speak because that would be "unwieldy."

When Hambides again tried to address the rally,

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warning about the anti-democratic precedent being set, a female supporter of the union grabbed his arm and tried to pull him away, saying “a woman is speaking”—referring to the speaker Riemer had interrupted earlier. Riemer then turned to Hambides and said: “Please f*ck off.”

Hambides intended to warn fellow strikers that the USYD management was planning to fundamentally restructure the university and that far from opposing this, the union was seeking to integrate itself into the management.

As part of a new enterprise agreement with the NTEU, the management is seeking to eliminate the traditional division of academics’ time between teaching, research and administrative tasks, and restrict research to areas approved by faculty heads. That would open the way for even more casualisation of teaching and further tailor research to the demands of business.

The NTEU backed the election of the Albanese Labor government, which will deepen the pro-market restructuring of tertiary education, just as Labor did under Hawke and Keating in the 1980s and 1990s, and under the Rudd and Greens-backed Gillard Labor governments from 2007 to 2013.

Speaking to the *Sydney Morning Herald* this week, Australian National University vice-chancellor Brian Schmidt said: “We should be prepared to make major overhauls to the system” and “everything should be on the table.”

The stoppages at USYD and strike votes at other campuses, including Western Sydney University and the University of Technology Sydney, while still confined by the NTEU within the enterprise bargaining regime, reflect a broad desire among university workers to reverse the decades of attacks against them.

Hambides told the WSWS that the CFPE is urging university workers to turn to other sections of the working class. Nurses, teachers, bus drivers and other workers also have taken strike action over real pay cuts and excessive workloads, and strikes and protests by workers have broken out internationally against soaring food and fuel prices.

“When workers raise the need for a unified struggle the unions say that solidarity strikes aren’t legal under Labor’s Fair Work Australia legislation,” Hambides said. “But the unions are the ones imposing those laws on workers. The unions are the industrial police force for management, so for workers to fight it has to be outside the unions. That is why we say: ‘Join the CFPE and help build independent rank-and-file committees.’”

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