

# Australian university union again blocks criticism at a strike rally

**Chris Gordon**  
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A rally at Western Sydney University (WSU) last Tuesday during a half-day stoppage called by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) provided another revealing picture of the union's efforts to block discussion and criticism by striking university workers of its pro-business record, particularly of helping managements impose tens of thousands of job cuts during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Above all, as the events showed, that censorship is directed at members of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file group initiated by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), which has exposed and provided an alternative to the NTEU's increasing collaboration with the employers.

When Gabriela Zabala, a WSU College staff member, sought to speak, she was denied the microphone, in a bid to prevent the majority of the strikers from hearing her comments. That was after she was asked: "Are you from the Socialist Equality Party?"

This is part of an ever-more blatant pattern of NTEU censorship against its own members, especially CFPE and SEP supporters. Zabala's treatment followed University of Sydney NTEU branch president Nick Riemer three times barring a striking SEP member, Zac Hambides, from speaking to his fellow workers. Like what happened at the WSU rally, Riemer told Hambides he had "made a political decision" not to allow him to speak.

Despite being stripped of the microphone, Zabala asked a series of questions that laid bare the role of the NTEU in facilitating ongoing cuts to jobs and real wages, amid the escalating cost of living crisis, while isolating university workers, campus-by-campus, and straitjacketing them in the enterprise bargaining system imposed by previous Labor governments and the unions.

Even though NTEU members at WSU have voted overwhelmingly in official ballots for industrial action, including a 75 percent vote for indefinite strikes, the union confined them to a half-day stoppage. It is asking the management for annual pay rises of less than 4 percent, far below the soaring inflation impact on food, fuel, energy and housing costs.

The NTEU is also seeking a scheme that will convert only a minority of casual staff to full-time ongoing jobs (150 full-time equivalent worth), despite management's admitted destruction of 400 jobs over three years, cutting the workforce by 13 percent from over 3,400 to less than 3,000.

That job-culling, which the NTEU assisted by striking a 2020 job and wage "sacrifice" deal with WSU, as at other universities, enabled management to declare a huge \$143 million surplus for 2021.

During more than nine months of talks with WSU management, the union already has agreed to enable more restructuring and job-shedding, only limited to "no more than one change process affecting a staff member's employment" during a three-year enterprise agreement.

Despite being denied the microphone, Zabala asked: "Why has the union called only an isolated half-day strike, despite an overwhelming vote for industrial action, including a 75 percent vote for indefinite strikes?"

"Why is the union only talking about a 4 percent annual pay rise when the real cost of living, as measured by prices for non-discretionary items like food, fuel, gas and electricity, is already 6.6 percent and rising rapidly?"

"Why is the union tailoring its pay claim to what is not going to dent the university's massive surplus?"

"Why are we being isolated in stoppages at individual

universities when all the EBAs [enterprise bargaining agreements] have expired and all university workers face the same issues?

“Why are we being kept separate from the strikes at the University of Sydney and UTS [University of Technology Sydney], when the University of Sydney management has refused to meet our colleagues’ demands, despite three days of strikes?

“Why is the union keeping us separate from the strike movement erupting among other workers over the soaring cost of living, including the public sector workers who are striking tomorrow and the teachers and nurses?

“Why has the union allowed 400 jobs to be axed by WSU under the last EBA, enabling the management to generate a surplus of \$143 million last year?”

Before the rally began, CFPE and SEP supporters circulated copies of WSWS articles on the NTEU’s censorship at the University of Sydney and the plans of the incoming Labor government to further restructure higher education along corporate lines.

In response, from the start of the event, WSU NTEU branch president David Burchell made clear the NTEU’s hostility to the CFPE and SEP. “We are not going to storm the Winter Palace,” he said. That was a reference to the October 1917 Russian Revolution, where the Bolshevik Party led the working class to overthrow the capitalist regime and form the first workers’ state. The comment was a cynical expression of the union’s hostility to a socialist program, and its fear that such a perspective can win support among staff and academics.

The NTEU’s pro-capitalist stance was underscored by the choice of the first two speakers, Labor Party Senator Tony Sheldon and Greens Senator Mehreen Faruqi. While Zabala, a socialist, was banned, pride of place was given to these two representatives of the parliamentary establishment, both committed to supporting the recently-installed Labor government, which is relying heavily on the unions to suppress workers’ opposition to wage and social spending cuts.

It was the last Greens-backed Labor government, that of Julia Gillard, which introduced the market-based “education revolution” that provided the platform for the deepening attack on university staff over the past decade and imposed billions of dollars in cuts to university funding.

Sheldon is a former Transport Workers Union national secretary, under whose leadership the gig-economy became predominant in the delivery industry. Hypocritically, he drew cheers when he declared “shameful” the fact that 70 percent of university workers are casuals.

The truth is that casualisation has been assisted by NTEU enterprise agreements, such as the existing one at WSU, which places no limit on the process, instead accepting the management’s lying claim: “It is not the University’s intention to use casual employment to fill positions that could otherwise reasonably be filled on an ongoing or fixed-termed basis.”

By contrast, the SEP’s election statement set out a socialist program of action to fight the deepening assault on jobs and conditions. It called for full cost-of-living wage rises for all workers and “a full-time, permanent job on decent wages and conditions for all who want one.”

To win such essential demands, workers need to build new organisations, rank-and-file committees, totally independent of Labor, the Greens and the unions.

All university workers should oppose the NTEU’s censorship of socialist workers and demand its immediate reversal. The silencing of critical workers is a warning that the union will support management victimisations and is preparing to inflict further sell-outs. The defence of democratic rights, including for all workers to be allowed to speak at strikes and NTEU meetings, is a key component of the struggle against this offensive on jobs, wages and conditions.

Contact the CFPE:

**Email:** [cfpe.aus@gmail.com](mailto:cfpe.aus@gmail.com)

**Facebook:** [facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout/](https://facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout/)

**Facebook:** [facebook.com/commforpubliceducation](https://facebook.com/commforpubliceducation)

**Twitter:** @CFPE\_Australia



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