

Three groups vie to shore up discredited Australian university trade union

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19 June 2022

There is widespread hostility among Australian university workers to the role of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), particularly since it imposed unprecedented cuts to jobs and conditions during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, on top of decades of facilitating the corporatisation and casualisation of the country's public universities.

Over the past two years, the NTEU has blocked any unified struggle by university workers against the devastating destruction of at least 40,000 jobs, while it struck deals with managements to sacrifice wages and conditions. This enabled the employers to post huge profits for 2021, topped by a \$1.04 billion surplus at the University of Sydney.

A rank-and-file revolt in 2020 prevented the NTEU from imposing an across-the-board "job protection" agreement with the managements to permit wage cuts of up to 15 percent, as well as the axing of 18,000 jobs. But the NTEU then proceeded to collaborate with individual managements to impose similar attacks, university-by-university.

Far from an aberration, this bitter experience for university workers displayed the true nature of all the corporate trade unions. It showed that these apparatuses are not workers' organisations at all. Instead, they tie workers to the profit requirements of their employers, riding roughshod over the opposition and interests of their own members.

In a revealing sign of the resulting collapse of the NTEU's support and membership, three teams within the union are contesting August's elections for the NTEU's top posts. These are desperate efforts to head off the disaffection and prevent workers from breaking out of the grip of the union apparatus.

These attempts to "renew" the NTEU, or even create a "new NTEU," are occurring just as the working class as a whole faces a cost of living crisis and a confrontation with the recently-installed Labor government, which has already signalled its intent to cut social spending and suppress demands for real wage rises to match the soaring living costs.

The first team consists of the existing NTEU national leadership, augmented by the nomination of a new general secretary, the current New South Wales state secretary Damien Cahill. The second group, running under the banner of "A new NTEU," is standing Anastasia Kanjere, a "rank-and-file activist" for general secretary on a platform of overcoming the "crisis of trust" in the NTEU. Another team, calling itself "Renew NTEU," is seeking to take control of the NTEU's Victorian state branch, on promises of "empowering branches."

Whatever their tactical difference, these formations are all seeking to shore up the decaying union, while securing highly-paid posts for themselves. They are trying to keep workers straitjacketed within the pro-capitalist framework of trade unions, which have been transformed over the past four decades into the industrial police forces of declining wages and conditions, and accelerating levels of wealth accumulation by the corporate elite. The false illusion peddled by all three slates is that the union can be "reformed" and pressured into fighting for the interests of their members.

To carry out this perspective, all three have stood by with unstated

agreement while NTEU officials, including the University of Sydney branch president Nick Riemer, a supporter of the pseudo-left Solidarity group, have barred Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members—striking workers themselves—from speaking at strike rallies. This should be a warning to all university workers. These anti-democratic methods are a reflection of the pro-business program these groups would themselves impose in office.

NTEU reshuffles

With the departure of the discredited NTEU general secretary Matthew McGowan, NTEU national president Alison Barnes, an ex-member of the now defunct pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation, recently tweeted her "excited" support for Cahill. Barnes said Cahill was "the ideal person to provide the leadership our union needs to build a strong and united NTEU." But both Barnes and Cahill are equally disgraced by the 2020 sellout, in which they were both involved.

As proof of Cahill's credentials, Barnes referred her followers to a "must read" June 2 *Conversation* article by him, in which he bemoaned the hundreds of millions of dollars in surpluses recorded by universities around the country, yet said nothing about the 2020 betrayal, which he helped inflict, or how it enabled the managements to profit handsomely by axing jobs and conditions.

Cahill began his article by attempting to sow illusions in the Labor government, whose election "probably drew sighs of relief across the higher education sector." He said university staff and students would be "hoping for a more sympathetic approach than they received from the Coalition government." That was despite admitting that Labor had made "few concrete policy commitments to universities" beyond the "welcome" addition of 20,000 student places.

The truth is that Education Minister Jason Clare is committed to implementing the pro-business blueprint outlined last August by Labor's former education spokeswoman Tanya Plibersek, which consists of working with the unions and other "stakeholders" to further restructure higher education to satisfy the vocational training and research requirements of big business.

Typically, in his first interview as education minister, on Sky News on June 1, Clare spoke only of universities as "one of the biggest export markets that we've got" and "skilling up Aussies" for jobs.

Cahill avoided any mention of the market-driven "education revolution" rolled out by the last Rudd-Gillard Labor government, which accelerated the conversion of universities into money-making enterprises, competing with each other for student enrolments, especially of full-fee paying international students, in order to survive repeated government funding cuts.

While criticising the fact that 70 percent of university academics and professional staff are now casuals, and subjected to systemic underpayment or "wage theft," Cahill promoted a Senate committee report on job security as a "good starting point" for the Labor government.

Yet that committee issued an essentially meaningless recommendation

that universities “set publicly available targets for increasing permanent employment and reducing casualisation.” The entirely unenforceable “recommendation” will do nothing to stop casualisation, which is the business model of all university administrations.

Likewise, the committee suggested legislation to “improve the ability of unions to inspect the records of universities with respect to potential wage theft.” The premise is that the unions were not aware of wage theft, despite imposing the enterprise agreements that have allowed such practices to spread since the 1990s.

To try to distance itself from the national leadership, another group is standing present Victorian deputy state secretary Sarah Roberts for state secretary on a “Renew NTEU” ticket. Its platform speaks of empowering branches which “for too long have been sidelined in decision making, left scrabbling for resources.” Little else is yet known about this formation.

“A New NTEU”

Led by Kanjere, the third team, “A New NTEU,” is advocating “transparency and democracy to restore trust of workers in the NTEU,” after the “job protection” debacle. Yet it apologises for that betrayal, saying the union’s decisions were “made in rightful recognition of our Union’s relative position of weakness,” although that “served only to solidify that position of weakness.”

The group says: “A well organised and powerful union that facilitates workers to leverage their enormous and largely untapped collective power is the only solution.”

However, the group offers no program—no demands for the restoration of all jobs, or pay rises to make up for past erosion and for full cost-of-living increases, or for opposition to face-to-face classes in the worsening COVID-19 pandemic. Its sole aim is to rebuild the NTEU, so that members are “in bargaining rooms.”

Far from opposing the enterprise bargaining system, which splits workers into individual workplaces, ties them to the requirement of “their” employers and outlaws industrial action except during union-controlled bargaining periods, “A New NTEU” is committed to maintaining that straitjacket.

In an April 20 interview with *Jacobin* magazine, which is associated with pseudo-left elements within the US Democratic Party, Kanjere stated: “Also, most of our members are either already involved in enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs) or about to go into EBA negotiations. EBA campaigns require smart organizing to make sure that workers understand the relevance of quite complicated and technical negotiations.”

This EBA system, with its anti-strike laws, was drawn up by the unions themselves, under the Keating Labor government in 1992, as means of atomising and stifling workers and entrenching the role of the unions as enforcement arms of government.

Significantly, “A New NTEU” makes not one criticism of Labor’s record, pointing to the team’s readiness to collaborate with the Albanese government.

The group’s statement, “Why We Need a New NTEU,” paints a revealing picture of the NTEU’s ruthless methods to impose its sellouts. Democratic decisions are “frequently overridden or ignored,” with a “culture of secrecy” and a “poor culture of accountability.” There are “cosy chats with Vice Chancellors,” use of “expensive lawyers” and “high-salaried officials.”

The results feature “member distrust of senior officials and senior official distrust of members,” plus “uncontested elections—even for the most important roles—are the expected norm” and “voter turnout in the few elections we do have is worryingly low.”

These outcomes are not the product of poor individual officials, however. They are the organic result of the pro-capitalist program of all the trade unions, which have systematically suppressed workers’ struggles for decades, especially since the unions signed their Accords with the

Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996.

That intrinsic nature of the unions can be seen from the bitter experiences of teachers in Chicago. Similar pseudo-left forces, the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE), have controlled the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) over the past decade, after winning office by posturing as exponents of “grassroots organising.”

Almost immediately after taking office, CORE began engineering one betrayal after another, including the shutdown of a strike in 2012 which paved the way for dozens of school closures, and the sellout of another strike in 2019, with pay increases of less than half the inflation rate. In 2021 and 2022, the union actively collaborated with Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot and the Biden administration to reopen schools during the pandemic, demanding only token and worthless safety agreements, against overwhelming opposition from rank-and-file teachers.

Such is the disaffection of teachers that ex-CORE members ran on a “REAL” platform in recent CTU elections, claiming to aim for a return to CORE’s purported principles of rank-and-file democracy and transparency. Should REAL end up in the leadership of the CTU, it would only follow in CORE’s pro-business footsteps, and the same goes for their counterparts in the NTEU.

The aim of all such groups is to prevent the growing opposition among educators and students from taking an independent form, outside of the control of the union machines.

Opposition to the union apparatuses is developing among workers around the world, but this requires the formation of genuine rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions and based on an opposed perspective, that is a socialist perspective, that rejects the dictates of the corporate elite and its political servants in capitalist governments.

That means building the CFPE, the educators’ rank-and-file organisation, initiated by the SEP, as part of an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

To discuss and join this fight, contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout/

Facebook: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

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To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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