Australian university union defends silencing socialist and delaying strike action

Our correspondent
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A sparsely-attended National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) meeting at Western Sydney University (WSU) this week provided another revealing picture of the role of the union.

First, the branch president defiantly defended his refusal of the microphone to a striking worker and socialist at this month's half-day strike rally at the university.

Second, backed by union officials, the branch committee proposed that any further strike action be delayed until the Spring semester—five weeks away. That was despite management responding to the limited half-day stoppage by proposing another real wage cut—a pay rise averaging just 2.6 percent a year, far below the soaring cost of living.

At the beginning of the meeting, Michael Head, a longtime university worker and member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), moved a resolution to condemn the branch president, David Burchell, for denying the microphone to Gabriela Zabala, a striking WSU College lecturer and SEP member, at the half-day stoppage rally.

Head demanded to know why Burchell had asked Zabala if she was speaking as a member of the SEP. "This is open discrimination against socialists. Labor and Greens MPs were featured on the platform, while a socialist, a striking worker herself, was denied the microphone.

"I wish to move: 'That this meeting condemn the attack on the democratic rights of striking workers constituted by the NTEU branch president refusing the microphone to a striking worker and socialist at the June 7 half-day stoppage rally.'"

Head posted in the meeting chat a link to the WSWS article that published a video of Zabala speaking without a microphone after being denied it by Burchell.

Head pointed out that this was not an isolated incident. Similar political censorship of striking workers, members of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the SEP, had occurred three times at the University of Sydney in recent weeks.

Burchell, who chaired this week's meeting, delayed debate on that motion until the end of the agenda, saying the meeting had been called to discuss the "bargaining" with management for a new enterprise agreement (EA).

When that debate finally occurred, with only several minutes left, Burchell flatly defended his conduct. He not only denied that striking union members had any right to speak at strike rallies, but effectively admitted the political censorship involved.

"Every member does not have the right to speak at rallies," Burchell said. "That could disrupt the rally." He added: "You [the SEP] do not believe in unions, so it would be foolish to allow that."

That makes explicit the anti-democratic practices of the NTEU, and how far they can extend to all university workers. These practices involve gagging workers who wish to criticise the union's ongoing record of sellouts on jobs, wages and conditions, and in particular CFPE and SEP supporters who are fighting for the formation of genuine working-class organisations, rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions.

Another concerned worker, shocked by Burchell's actions, seconded the motion put by Head, but about 50 of the 60 attendees voted against it.

There was a similar majority for the NTEU's recommendation to delay any further stoppage until the Spring semester, which begins on July 25. Burchell advocated treating the vice chancellor, Barney Glover, "decently" regardless of management's insistence on

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wage-cutting.

Despite sky-rocketing inflation, with the Reserve Bank of Australia predicting a 7 percent official rate by the end of the year, Burchell restated that the union was seeking only a pay rise “with a 3 in front.” That demonstrates the readiness of the NTEU, like other unions, to accept real wage cuts.

Such a betrayal would be in line with this week’s demand by central bank governor Philip Lowe, supported by the Albanese Labor government, that wage rises be kept below 3.5 percent despite rising inflation for “years” to come.

Burchell reported Glover had also reneged on a deal with the union to convert casuals to the equivalent of 150 permanent positions over the life of the next EA, offering just 75 posts instead. Either deal would do little to reverse management’s elimination of 400 permanent jobs over the past three years, or to improve the livelihoods of thousands of casuals, which helped it post a surplus of $143 million in 2021.

Nevertheless, Burchell said it was not in the union’s “style” to “turn nasty.” That indicates the NTEU’s cosy relations with management. It is a warning of preparations to impose another sellout deal, mutually-beneficial to the management and the union.

In opposing the recommendation, Head said the union was further delaying strike action, nearly a year after the previous EA expired, despite an overwhelming ballot for industrial action, including a 75 percent vote for indefinite strikes.

Head said university workers were being siloed in stoppages at individual universities when all the university EAs nationally had expired and managements had refused to meet workers’ demands. He said the NTEU was keeping university workers separate from the strike movement erupting over the soaring cost of living, including among public sector workers, teachers and nurses.

Head pointed out that the trade unions had straitjacketed workers for four decades, driving down strikes to historic lows, since the 1983 prices and incomes Accord between the Hawke-Keating Labor government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions. During that period, the share of national income going to profits had doubled.

Now the NTEU was welcoming a Labor government that opposes any “across-the-board” cost of living pay rises for workers, as shown by its submission to the Fair Work Commission, and plans to further restructure higher education along corporate lines.

Head called for the formation of rank-and-file committees that would fight for real wage rises in line with inflation and for the restoration of all the tens of thousands of jobs wiped out in universities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There was widespread hostility among university workers to the record of the NTEU, particularly since it imposed unprecedented cuts to jobs and conditions during the first two years of the pandemic, on top of decades of facilitating the corporatisation and casualisation of the country’s public universities.

What was required was the building of rank-and-file committees 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.

“We need a workers’ government, based on socialist policies, not a pro-business Labor government,” Head said. “If you agree, join the Committee for Public Education, a rank-and-file educators committee.”

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout/

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