

Australia: SEP member calls for unified struggle by university staff against Labor's pro-market agenda

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At a University of Sydney branch meeting of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) last week, Zac Hambides, a member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), called for a mass meeting of all university workers to oppose the federal Labor government's pro-business agenda.

Labor's agenda was laid out at the "Universities Australia 2022 Gala Dinner" earlier this month. Education Minister Jason Clare called for universities to "work with industry" to meet the needs of business, restore Australia's \$40 billion education export industry and assist in "strengthening our nation's security and resilience."

Clare outlined plans for an "Australian Universities Accord" to bring the education trade unions into a closer partnership with corporate chiefs, university managements and government representatives.

He made no mention of the tens of thousands of jobs destroyed during the COVID-19 pandemic while the NTEU stifled opposition, or the previous Liberal-National Coalition government's further deep cut to university funding in this April's budget, for which Labor voted.

NTEU national president Alison Barnes has backed Labor's agenda, saying in a July 12 email sent to members that "universities have a fundamental role in solving labour shortages and building the workforce of tomorrow."

The NTEU meeting at University of Sydney was called to discuss two rival resolutions from the branch committee regarding the union's wage claim as part of its enterprise bargaining with management.

The branch committee previously voted for a wage

claim of CPI (Consumer Price Index) plus 2.5 percent, but the NTEU national executive decreed that the maximum wage claim that branches could make is CPI plus 1.5 percent.

Both claims attempt to head off mounting unrest among university staff and all workers over the soaring cost of living. Backed by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's Labor government, Reserve Bank of Australia governor Philip Lowe last month demanded that wage rises be kept below 3.5 percent per year, despite predicting 7 percent inflation by the end of the year.

The meeting provided a case study in how the various pseudo-left groups function to corral rising discontent back into the hands of the trade unions, which support the Labor government and have suppressed workers' struggles, including against university cuts, for decades.

The majority branch committee resolution, endorsed by branch president Nick Riemer, a supporter of one such group, Solidarity, called for the branch to amend its wage claim to CPI plus 1.5 percent, in line with the national executive's edict.

The resolution noted "its disagreement" with the national executive for not allowing "strong branches" to make higher claims and called for a "meeting of NTEU members" from the university and other branches to discuss a "national council motion or plebiscite" to be put to the national executive.

The minority resolution, moved by another pseudo-left representative, Socialist Alternative member Alma Torlakovic, called for a rejection of the national executive's position and the retention of the CPI plus 2.5 percent claim.

Hambides moved the following amendment to the

minority resolution:

“That the union convenes an urgent meeting, open to all university workers, to take a united position to reject not only the NTEU national executive’s pay limit edict but the underlying pro-business agenda of the NTEU and the Labor government. That includes the ongoing destruction of jobs and conditions, the unsafe reopening of universities and schools that has fuelled the worsening COVID-19 disaster, and Labor’s proposed government-business-union Accord to further restructure universities to satisfy the profit demands of the corporate ruling class.”

Speaking to the amendment, Hambides said: “In May 2020, behind member’s backs, the national executive put forward the ‘Job Protection Framework,’ which offered employers wage cuts of up to 15 percent and allowed for up to 20,000 job losses.

“The NTEU has praised the Labor government, which is implementing its restructuring agenda against education. Clare has continued from [former shadow education minister Tanya] Plibersek in calling for an Accord between big business, the unions, and universities. Clare recently praised the former [Liberal-Coalition] Morrison government’s ‘commercialisation’ of the universities...”

“This whole agenda has been outlined before by EY, formerly Ernst & Young, which called for the ‘death’ of higher education, and its replacement with universities purely for the services of business.

“That’s why we need to reject not just the wage edict but the entire pro-business agenda behind it. We call for a meeting to hold a democratic discussion involving all university staff, both union and non-union, about the way forward as part of building the necessary movement to defeat this whole pro-market agenda.”

Local Greens councillor Dylan Griffiths immediately opposed Hambides, writing in the chat that the amendment was “a real distraction” from the “large task” of “bargaining a new agreement.”

Torlakovic rejected the amendment, stating that while “members should direct the wage claim they have to live with,” her motion was only aimed at putting “more pressure on the national executive” and should not be taken as a call to break from the national executive.

A significant portion of the meeting was taken up by Riemer warning against opposing the national executive. Riemer claimed management could use a

split with the national executive to “discredit us,” and it could “jeopardise our ability to take protected action.”

Only about 50 staff took part in the meeting, the notice of which had been buried by the NTEU in other emails. Before the discussion even began, NTEU NSW Division industrial officer Simon Kempton declared that a quorum had not been met, so no voting would be permitted.

Riemer dismissed calls for a second meeting next week at which NSW Division secretary Damien Cahill could answer questions about why the national executive rejected the branch’s wage claim. That left intact the majority branch committee decision to acquiesce to the national executive.

Workers at other universities, including the University of Technology Sydney and the University of Newcastle, have recently voted overwhelmingly for industrial action over wages and conditions, as they did earlier at the University of Sydney and Western Sydney University.

But the NTEU, aided and abetted by the pseudo-left groups, is continuing to keep its members separated from each other. Above all, it is blocking them from fighting Labor’s corporate restructuring plans, just as it volunteered job and wage cuts under the Coalition government in 2020 and 2021.

To fight for a proper wage rise, oppose Labor’s agenda and take forward the struggle for free first-class public education and decent secure working conditions, university workers and students need to build rank-and-file committees, totally independent of the unions. The Committee For Public Education, established by the SEP, is developing a movement for this perspective.

Contact the CFPE:

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