

SEP member calls for unified struggle of workers at Australian university strike rally

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The increasingly-discredited National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) leadership was forced to allow Zac Hambides, a striking worker and member of the Socialist Equality Party and the Committee for Public Education, to speak at a University of Sydney (USYD) strike rally on August 17 after blocking him from speaking on three prior occasions.

The stoppage was the latest in a series of one- or -two-day strikes called by the NTEU at the university, seeking a new enterprise agreement with the management. But the management has continued to aggressively demand wage rises far below the rate of inflation, as well as further cuts to workers' conditions, on top of the wholesale destruction of jobs since 2020.

Hambides called for “a broader action of the entire university sector,” in which every worker could raise what they think “is needed to improve education, not what the union or management says is affordable.”

The NTEU is trying to promote a deal it struck at Western Sydney University (WSU). Speaking before Hambides, NTEU official Vince Caughley claimed it was “a game changer,” that would “put serious limits on workplace change,” and “divert a quarter of all casual work to permanent, integrated, academic jobs.”

In his remarks, Hambides exposed these claims. He explained the WSU deal enforces annual wage increases of 3.5 percent, which is a real wage cut, in line with the demands of the Reserve Bank of Australia and the Labor government, and provides no guarantee of any casuals being selected by management for full-time work.

Hambides said the WSU agreement—which has yet to be even voted on—was “the ‘Job Protection Framework’ mark two.” This referred to the pact struck, behind workers' backs, by the NTEU nationally in May 2020 to cut wages by up to 15 percent and

allow for at least 18,000 job losses nationally. That agreement, to foist the burden of the COVID-19 disaster onto university workers, collapsed in the face of rank-and-file opposition, but the NTEU continued to collaborate with employers, allowing them to destroy tens of thousands of jobs in 2020 and 2021.

Hambides warned against the Labor government's agenda of austerity and war. “The Labor government under Albanese has committed to spending billions to join a US-led war against China. The first thing Albanese did after being sworn in as prime minister was to attend the Quad military alliance. That money should be spent on education and health care.

“In higher education, Labor is implementing what is being demanded by big business. EY, formerly Ernst & Young, has declared that ‘HIGHER EDUCATION IS DEAD’ and needs to be replaced with a ‘knowledge services sector’ where every aspect of teaching and research is directly measured toward the interests of big business. This is Labor's agenda and has always been. What is required is a political fight for public education.”

Hambides objected to the fact that the NTEU invited Greens Senator Mehreen Faruqi to speak at the rally, posing as a defender of education. Hambides explained: “The Greens backed the last Labor government, which carried out the biggest cuts to university education in history.” The Gillard Labor government cut \$2.7 billion from university funding in 2013.

Hambides urged workers to “reject the entire political establishment,” take up a socialist perspective, and “link up with our brothers and sisters in other workplaces, particularly those on strike today,” referring to that day's industrial action by Sydney rail workers.

Hambides pointed to a growing strike wave by

workers globally and said: “This is the social force that we have to turn to fight for education. These are our allies, not the union bureaucracy that has negotiated one sell out deal after another, and not the big business Labor Party, backed to the hilt by the Greens.”

Speaking to the WSWS, **Vicky**, an academic who has been employed on fixed-term contracts at USYD since 2008, summed up the attitude of many educators. “I get a sense from everyone I speak to of the need to deliver a quality education, but everyone is exhausted and at the end of their tether,” she said. “We all have an idealistic view of what university should be, a place of ideas and change, yet we are trapped in this capitalist construct. We are being squeezed dry.

“Part of the reason my family migrated to Australia was because education was free. But I see my children having to work, worrying about their student debt, not being able to really choose a profession they want because they are scared about how much money it is going to cost and if it means they will be able to afford a house or pay off their student debt.

“Privatisation is how we got here. In the primary and secondary sector, you are fighting for money with private schools that charge exorbitant fees and can take away your best teachers, so we need a huge change in the way we do education in Australia, and it should be public, everyone should have a right to quality education, not if you have money. The government says, we want educated people, but only rich people can get that.”

A postal worker who stopped at the rally said: “Education is very important. It should be at the forefront of everything.” He also supported the train drivers’ strikes, saying: “They are doing long hours, so they need to be alert driving these vehicles. It’s not easy, you have to be very focused. They should be paid better and get better sleep.

“The unions are happy to take your money, but when you need to voice things, they need to show up and back you. The CEPU (Communications, Electrical, and Plumbing Union) just feels absent till you need to have a say, and even then it’s a struggle to get through [to them]. You don’t feel represented or protected.

“It’s not just one industry or one workplace, it’s everything, transport, customer service, education, hospitals. Every industry needs to pull together.”

USYD NTEU branch president Nick Riemer

prevented Hambides from addressing fellow striking workers on May 11 and 24 and cut Hambides off when he tried to speak at a members’ meeting on May 18. That is because Hambides is a socialist, and exposes the collaboration of the union with management.

The Committee for Public Education is fighting to unify the struggles of all education workers with the working class as a whole through the formation of genuine rank-and-file committees independent of the unions. Contact the CFPE:

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