

University of Sydney staff vote for more stoppages

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At a National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) meeting at the University of Sydney (USYD) last week, members voted 92 percent in favour of going on strike for the fourth time this year. The majority voted to make it a two-day strike on October 13 and 14.

The NTEU has called a series of limited one- or two-day stoppages at the university, seeking a new enterprise agreement. But 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 elimination of hundreds of jobs since 2020.

Management is seeking to fundamentally change academic teaching to meet the demands of the financial elite for university education and research to be tailored more directly to business needs. This agenda is backed by the Albanese Labor government.

The latest vote highlights the determination of USYD workers to fight management. It also reflects the wider intent of university staff to oppose the wholesale destruction of jobs and conditions that the NTEU has permitted, especially since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The aim of the NTEU, however, is to keep isolating workers, university-by-university, and wear them down through ineffectual one- or two-day strikes. The union leaders are afraid of a broader movement in opposition to the union's collaboration with managements.

University of Queensland workers voted by 93 percent to take one-day strikes and stopped work on September 1, but the union limited the action to conclude at 10 a.m. University of Newcastle staff voted "overwhelmingly" to strike on September 21 for 24 hours. Griffith University workers will be voting soon on industrial action. Staff at James Cook University and Queensland University of Technology voted

"unanimously" to seek a protected action ballot, which is required to take industrial action under the draconian laws adopted by the last Labor government, backed by the unions, in 2009.

At the USYD meeting, NTEU branch president Nick Riemer summed up the unsuccessful results of over a year of bargaining. "Management is all take and no give," he said, "The campaign could drag on till next year."

Riemer stated that "we have to escalate" but only proposed another one- or two-day strike. Like the previous strikes, this would just involve NTEU members, about 2,000 in a workforce of around 10,000. Riemer made no appeal for joint action with other universities.

Zac Hambides, a member of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and Socialist Equality Party (SEP), attempted to move an amendment to call for "an indefinite strike starting with an all-day mass stopwork meeting of all university staff in Australia to decide what is needed to fight for first-class tertiary education as a social right with decent pay, conditions, and secure employment."

Despite Hambides raising his hand from the start of the discussion, Riemer avoided giving him the call, in keeping with repeated attempts to censor Hambides and members of the Socialist Equality Party.

Chris Gordon, a CFPE member at Macquarie University, said he opposed restricting "the actions of workers to this university" but was swiftly cut off by Riemer, underscoring the union's hostility to any unified struggle.

Hambides was eventually allowed to speak but to a different agenda item calling for alternative types of industrial action. Hambides said members had been denied the right to vote on his motion but explained

why it was necessary.

“University-by-university strikes are a recipe for defeat in the face of a tripartite national assault on education led by the Albanese Labor government in alliance with big business and the unions,” which had been on display at the government’s September 1–2 “Jobs and Skills Summit.”

“This requires a national response by the working class, of which university staff are a component. We call for the creation of rank-and-file committees independent of the NTEU to establish a united struggle of all education workers in alliance with our brothers and sisters in other industries.

“It must be independent of the NTEU because the union has collaborated with management for decades. This has accelerated in the pandemic and now the union is using a potential deal at WSU [Western Sydney University] as a template for cuts nationally. The WSU deal is a wage cut while providing no guarantees to casuals and has not been voted on by members.”

Riemer abruptly cut Hambides off, claiming he had used up his time.

The USYD meeting is another demonstration that the unions cannot be reformed. The greater the pressure on the union bureaucracy from below, the more it seeks to shut down discussion.

Opposition to the pro-business union apparatuses is developing among workers around the world, but this requires the formation of new genuine organisations of struggle—rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions and based on a socialist perspective that rejects the dictates of the corporate elite.

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. Contact the CFPE:

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