

Endless Australian university union betrayals result in election debacle

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7 October 2022

Growing disillusionment among university workers with the still-worsening sellouts inflicted by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) led to only about one-fifth of the union's shrinking membership voting in last month's NTEU elections.

Results were a debacle, not just for the Labor and Greens-oriented leadership, which scraped back into office with small votes. Even more striking was the failure of various falsely-named "Rank and File," "New NTEU," "Renew NTEU" and "NTEU Fightback" formations to displace the incumbent regime by appealing to members to try to "rebuild" or "renew" the discredited union.

Alison Barnes, an ex-member of the now defunct pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation, was re-elected NTEU president with only 3,672 votes. That was about 14 percent of the national membership of 26,563, which has fallen from around 31,000 since 2020. Just 21 percent of members voted. Barnes defeated Fahad Ali, the New NTEU candidate, by polling 66.15 percent of this shrunken vote.

Alongside Barnes on a "Strong United" ticket, New South Wales NTEU secretary Damien Cahill was elected general secretary, despite obtaining just 3,199 votes, or about 12 percent of the membership. He defeated the New NTEU's Anastasia Kanjere by polling 58.24 percent of the vote.

Kanjere, a "rank-and-file activist," led the New NTEU ticket, standing on a politically bankrupt platform of seeking to overcome the "crisis of trust" in the NTEU.

Strong United's Gabe Gooding was re-elected national assistant secretary, defeating the New NTEU's Andrew Beitzel by securing 62.3 percent of the turnout.

The elections marked the first time the national leadership positions had been contested for 20 years. They were held in the lengthening shadow of the NTEU's infamous bid to help the campus employers impose up to 18,000 job cuts and 15 percent pay cuts in early 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic first hit.

That was on top of decades of the NTEU and other campus unions facilitating the corporatisation and casualisation of the country's public universities, which has accelerated

since the market-driven and union-backed "education revolution" imposed by the last Labor government.

Widespread outrage over the NTEU's blatant pro-management betrayal led to the collapse of its misnamed "Job Protection Framework" in May 2020. But the NTEU then pushed through similar sacrifices at individual universities, fervidly opposing calls by members of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), a rank-and-file network initiated by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), for a unified struggle against the resulting tsunami of tens of thousands of job losses.

Like every other trade union apparatus, the NTEU worked hand-in-glove with the employers and the bipartisan "National Cabinet" to impose the burden of the pandemic onto the backs of workers—while billions of dollars were poured into corporate coffers—and then pushed its members back into unsafe classrooms and offices.

The NTEU's treacherous record has only deepened over the past two years, even as many universities have posted record profits, topped by a \$1.04 billion surplus at the University of Sydney, and stepped up their cuts to jobs and conditions on the back of the NTEU's willing collaboration with managements.

Most recently, the NTEU desperately claimed an "historic win" at Western Sydney University (WSU). It is proposing an agreement with management that further reduces real wages and allows management to continue to exploit hundreds of low-paid casuals. Despite the WSU NTEU branch president later describing the deal as a "grand compromise," union officials are still nervously touting this "win" nationally to attempt to head off discontent and growing numbers of votes for strikes at universities across the country.

Anger and frustration are rising among university workers as the NTEU continues to police the failed enterprise bargaining system, despite all university enterprise agreements having expired—many more than a year ago.

This "bargaining" system separates workers into individual workplaces, outlawing unified struggles. Backed

by repressive anti-strike laws, it was drawn up by the trade unions themselves, under the Keating Labor government in 1992. It is a means of atomising and stifling workers and entrenching the role of the union bureaucrats in the official workplace relations machinery as enforcement officers of governments and big business.

Far from opposing this Labor-union straitjacket, the “New NTEU” and other pseudo-left groups that stood in the elections proposed to shore it up, along with the NTEU bureaucracy itself. They each called for “stronger” enterprise bargaining campaigns to try to win “concessions” from individual managements.

Whatever their tactical squabbles, their preoccupation was with preventing the discontent of university workers from breaking out of the control of the NTEU and the Labor-connected union apparatus as a whole.

There were no demands from any of them, including Socialist Alternative’s “NTEU Fightback” and the “Rank-and-File Action” coalition of Labor, Greens and Solidarity members, for the restoration of the 40,000 or more jobs destroyed since 2020, or for opposition to face-to-face classes and workplaces in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite efforts to sign up more members for the NTEU to vote in the elections—even running NTEU “recruitment stalls”—their appeals fell flat. At the University of Sydney, where two of these groups were the most active, their candidates won a majority of posts on the union’s branch committee. But their first preference votes fell short of 200 each. That was out of the 450 or so members who voted, just 21 percent of the NTEU members at the university.

As well as urging university workers to “rebuild” the crumbling NTEU machinery, these supposed “opposition” groups made no criticism of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s government, pointing to their readiness to collaborate with it.

This is under conditions in which the NTEU and every other union is demanding that wage rises be kept far below raging inflation, in line with the demands of Albanese’s government. His government also has signalled its intent to cut social spending, boost military preparations for a US-led war against China and draft an “Accord” with the university employers and unions to further restructure tertiary education to satisfy corporate requirements.

Regardless of the calls to “renew” the NTEU, its foul record is not an aberration. It is the organic result of the pro-capitalist program of 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.

The increasingly bitter experiences of university workers are actually exposing the true nature of all the corporatist

trade unions. These apparatuses are not workers’ organisations whatsoever. Instead, they tie workers to the profit requirements of employers, riding roughshod over the opposition and interests of their own members.

Where unions once sought limited gains for workers—always within the framework of wage labour—the globalisation of production since the 1980s has transformed them into police forces for the ruling class, inflicting whatever attacks on working-class conditions employers demand for “international competitiveness.”

Opposition to the union apparatuses is developing among workers, including university workers, around the world, but this can be taken forward only through the formation of genuine rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions.

That is bound up with the fight for a diametrically opposed political perspective, that is a socialist perspective, that rejects the dictates of the corporate elite and its political servants in capitalist governments.

All the pseudo-left groups that stood in the elections vehemently oppose this perspective, fought for only by members of the CFPE and SEP as part of the building 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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