

Australian university union promotes Labor Party at Sydney strike rally

Our reporter
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At a strike rally last Thursday at the University of Sydney (USYD), the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) ludicrously promoted the Labor Party as a defender of education while again preventing non-vetted striking workers from speaking.

A New South Wales state Labor leader Mark Buttigieg was invited to address the rally, posturing as a parliamentary representative of “working people,” but a striking worker, Zac Hambides, a member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and Committee for Public Education (CFPE), was blocked from speaking to call for unified struggle of workers.

Since Labor took office federally in May, the NTEU’s isolation of workers, university-by-university, has become increasingly blatant. There have now been six days of strikes at USYD this year, while the NTEU’s negotiations with management over a new enterprise agreement have dragged out for 15 months.

Chairing the rally, NTEU USYD branch president Nick Riemer, associated with the pseudo-left Solidarity group, gave the microphone to Buttigieg after denouncing as a “disruption” a call by Hambides for striking workers to be allowed to speak. Riemer said he would “go on with the rally as planned” and called for a supposed vote, in which few people participated.

When Buttigieg spoke, the pseudo-left supporters in the rally cheered the former Electrical Trades Union bureaucrat. While falsely declaring that Labor “will be with you all the way,” Buttigieg avoided mentioning any specific demands on jobs, wages and conditions. Instead, he called for a “fair wage rise and secure work,” leaving space for the NTEU to push through another sell-out deal.

The NTEU’s promotion of Labor is a further warning of its plans to work closely with the Albanese federal Labor government, which is preparing the next wave of

pro-market restructuring in tertiary education via an “accord” between big business, unions and university managements.

This is part of Labor’s broader agenda, which includes imposing deadly “let it rip” COVID pandemic policies, delivering huge income tax cuts for the wealthy and ramping up military spending to join a US-led war against China, all of which means deep cuts to education and other social spending.

When Labor’s then education spokesperson Tanya Plibersek unveiled the party’s “accord” plan at a business summit in August 2021, she said its “principles” included “job creation, productivity and our national prosperity.” She did not mention the tens of thousands of university job cuts during the pandemic, or the decades-long cuts to funding, including by the last Labor government in 2012–13.

This “principle” dovetails with last year’s report by EY (formerly Ernst & Young) calling for the “death of higher education” and transformation of university education and research to more directly meet the demands of business.

Labor has a long record of pro-business university restructuring. The Hawke-Keating Labor government of 1983-96 re-introduced student fees, overturning the basic social right to free public education.

The Rudd-Gillard Labor government of 2007-13 imposed an “education revolution,” which combined finding cuts with a destructive system that forces universities to compete with each other for resources and student enrolments.

The NTEU is also lining up behind the demand of the Reserve Bank, endorsed by the Albanese government, that workers’ wage rises be kept below 3.5 percent a year—about half the inflation rate. The union is promoting such a pay-cutting deal at Western Sydney

University (WSU) as an “historic win.”

Damien Cahill, the incoming NTEU national general secretary, has falsely claimed that the WSU deal includes “the biggest one-off reduction in casualisation ever seen in an enterprise agreement in the higher education sector.”

In reality, the draft agreement, which is yet to be put to a ballot, allows management to pick and choose which casuals to fill about 150 education and teaching roles over three years.

The NTEU has become so discredited by the WSU deal that Cahill avoided any reference to it when speaking at the USYD rally. Instead, he urged USYD management to meet the union’s “reasonable” claims and “settle this agreement.”

Cahill said the dispute could last “into summer” or “next year, if necessary,” indicating the NTEU’s readiness to wear down workers to accept a sell-out.

USYD management is considering a WSU-style deal in which 300 permanent jobs supposedly would be created. Most of the roles would be “education-focused” and not enough to replace the more than 350 jobs axed in 2020 and 2021.

At an NTEU member’s meeting before the strike, Hambides raised the need for a political struggle against the Labor government, and warned that the NTEU was using the WSU deal as a template. Riemer admitted: “The ALP [Australian Labor Party] has been no friend of universities, and will no doubt continue not to be so.”

The fact Buttigieg was promoted at the USYD rally, including by Riemer, demonstrates the duplicity of the NTEU.

A member of the CFPE, an academic at Macquarie University, tried to address the membership meeting but was also blocked by Riemer. The CFPE member objected, saying that the issues at USYD were part of a “broader struggle” and that if the fight remained confined to USYD, “you are going to be defeated.” Riemer replied: “I am well aware of that.”

The various pseudo-left groups, such as NTEU Fightback, insist the union can be reformed through pressure from the membership. The experiences at USYD demonstrate the bankruptcy of this perspective, which serves only to keep workers trapped in the union straitjacket.

A new path, oriented to the working class as a whole,

is required for educators, independent of the Labor Party, the unions and their pseudo-left backers. That is why the CFPE and the Health Workers Rank-and-file Committee have called for a unified struggle of educators and health workers against the lifting of all pandemic safety measures, the intolerable workloads, the budget cuts and the slashing of real wages.

Their joint statement calls on workers to establish an integrated network of rank-and-file committees that “can serve as the organising centre for concrete actions aimed at advancing workers’ interests, including unified protests and strikes by health and education workers.” To discuss how to take forward this struggle contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [@CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)



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