

Australian university union removes dissenting members from online forum

Jack Turner**26 November 2022**

In a desperate and blatantly anti-democratic move last Thursday, National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) bureaucrats removed and blocked several union members from an online forum called to promote supposed “fantastic wins” by the union in two sell-out deals with university managements.

We urge all NTEU members, as well as other workers and students, to condemn this political censorship.

The New South Wales division of the NTEU called the event to hail retrograde, real wage-cutting enterprise agreements (EAs) proposed by the union at Western Sydney University (WSU) and Australian Catholic University (ACU).

Members of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) were evicted or barred from the forum for campaigning for a no vote on the WSU deal, which the NTEU and the university management are putting to an electronic ballot this Monday and Tuesday.

The very fact that CFPE members of the NTEU were censored points to the reactionary character of the proposed WSU and ACU agreements. If the deals are so fantastic, why are the union leaders terrified of opposition?

CFPE member Zac Hambides made comments in the forum chat, providing accurate information about the details of the WSU agreement, exposing the claims of a “big WIN” as a fraud. He posted a link to the CFPE statement calling for a no vote.

This undercut claims made at the forum by NTEU general secretary Damien Cahill that after the “traumatic” job destruction of 2020 and 2021, “we are starting to win” and the WSU and ACU agreements “set a really high bar for employment standards elsewhere.”

Cahill made no mention of the union’s role in stifling members’ opposition to the continuing jobs massacre,

launched by managements to exploit the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for cost-cutting restructuring. According to Cahill, the union’s “wins” now included wage gains, protection from redundancies and a “large scale reduction in casual employment.”

In fact, as documented by the CFPE statement, the WSU deal imposes an average 3.5 percent wage “rise” over three years—far below inflation. That dovetails with the efforts by all the trade unions to impose the federal Labor government’s demands—outlined in its October 25 budget—for at least two more years of real wage cuts, while delivering tax cuts for the rich and boosting military spending in preparation for involvement in US-led wars.

Far from protecting workers from job-slashing and casualisation, the WSU agreement permits repeated restructuring in “exceptional circumstances,” leaves the management with the power to determine if any casuals are “appointable” and creates a new classification of super-exploited, ex-casual teachers with little time for research.

Terri Mylett from the WSU NTEU branch executive initially tried to answer the CFPE member’s exposure of the agreement. She stated in the chat: “The members at WSU Branch endorsed the EAs. I think the members are smart enough to read the drafts and make up their own minds without advice from outside the Branch. It was an informed vote.”

In fact, only about 80 NTEU members took part in the WSU meeting to endorse the agreement, which was circulated less than a week earlier, during the middle of the exam period, giving members little time to examine the 120-page document.

From what little is known of the ACU deal, it is a similar sell-out. The day before the forum, *Campus Morning Mail* reported that ACU is cutting 106 full-

time-equivalent positions or 8.2 percent of its workforce.

When the forum host called for questions to be posted, Hambides asked: “Why are you promoting a deal at WSU that is a wage cut, does nothing to resolve casualisation, and doesn’t replace the 400 jobs lost at the start of the pandemic?”

For that, Hambides was removed from the meeting. Mike Head, another CFPE and NTEU member, attempted to join the meeting to protest the censorship but was blocked. A further CFPE supporter then joined the meeting to demand to know why members were being removed, only to be swiftly removed herself.

This brazen attack on workers’ democracy is a warning of the ruthless methods that the NTEU will use against all workers as it seeks to enforce similar regressive deals at universities across the country.

The NTEU’s assault is not an aberration. Hambides was barred from speaking at a series of strike meetings at the University of Sydney this year, despite being a striking worker himself.

Moreover, the NTEU’s actions are in line with the thuggish response of other unions, such as the United Workers Union, in trying to block striking workers from speaking to members of the Socialist Equality Party about the unions’ isolation and betrayals of their struggles.

Such an open attack on democratic rights in the universities, long regarded as centres of free speech and debate, is ominous. The NTEU is attempting to police the Labor government’s program of wage cuts, corporate restructuring and militarism, which is being spearheaded by the university sector.

The NTEU backs the Labor government’s pro-business agenda, which includes the further restructuring of universities, via a so-called Universities Accord, to satisfy the vocational and research demands of the corporate elite and the US-aligned military-intelligence establishment.

Labor’s first budget last month cemented decades of cuts to university funding, including the \$3 billion cut by the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government in 2013, slashed funding for public hospitals by \$2.4 billion over four years and increased military spending by 8 percent this financial year, setting a target of \$70 billion a year by 2030.

The censorship at Thursday’s forum underscores the

importance of the CFPE’s call for a no vote at WSU as a first step in developing a wider movement of university workers against the agenda of the Labor government, enforced by the unions.

That means taking matters out of the hands of the union officials by forming rank-and-file committees in order to develop demands based on the needs of workers and students, not corporate profit dictates. In this fight university workers will find allies among other sections of the working class who are facing similar union-enforced cuts.

This is the perspective advanced by the CFPE, a rank-and-file network established by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), as part of the worldwide fight to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. To discuss how to develop this campaign, we urge university workers and students to contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: @CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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