

Australian tertiary education union continues to isolate Sydney University strikes

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Last Wednesday, University of Sydney (USYD) workers held a ninth day of strikes, spread over many months, in what has become one of the longest currently running industrial disputes in Australia. Trade union negotiations for a new enterprise agreement began 20 months ago.

The protracted series of one- or two-day strikes expresses the determination of staff members to fight deeper cuts to jobs and conditions after years of mounting attacks, which have deepened throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. USYD workers have voted repeatedly for further stoppages.

But the prolonged nature of the dispute at one of the country's most prominent tertiary education institutions is also the result of the isolation of workers, university by university, at the hands of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU). This is part of a broader crisis of the NTEU, whose officials have been able to push through only six enterprise deals at Australia's 37 public universities since the union's latest round of bargaining began in 2021.

In every case, the NTEU has implemented sell-out deals, which it falsely describes as “game-changing improvements.” The agreement at Western Sydney University (WSU), for example, imposed a real wage cut and allowed management the final say on which casuals are offered permanent jobs. That does little or nothing to address the chronic casualisation of the workforce, permitted by previous NTEU enterprise agreements.

The NTEU is preparing to push through a similar rotten deal at USYD. NTEU branch president Nick Reimer has said the union has agreed to multiple “compromises” with management.

The union claims the university has backed down on the destruction of academic roles that include both

teaching and research. But management has only agreed to maintain current teaching and research positions. It is pushing for the creation of more “education-focused role” (EFR) positions, thereby continuing the attack on the teaching-research nexus.

Management has offered an average annual wage increase of only 4.275 percent over four years—just over half the official inflation rate. USYD NTEU branch president Nick Reimer has described the management offer as “unacceptable.” But it is actually slightly higher than the 3.5 percent annual increase at WSU, which NTEU general secretary Damien Cahill described as a “fair pay rise.”

Reimer, a supporter of the pseudo-left Solidarity group, again blocked Zac Hambides, a striking worker and member of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), from speaking at Wednesday's strike rally. Hambides sought to advance the need to link the strikes at USYD to a broader struggle, directed against the underlying pay-cutting and militarist agenda of the Albanese Labor government, which is spending billions to prepare to join a US war against China.

The NTEU's straitjacketing of workers within the narrow confines of USYD and enterprise bargaining, in line with the Labor government's program, has led to a dwindling participation of members at pickets. Each day of strikes has involved pickets until lunchtime, at which point members are urged to meet at a central location for speeches. While some university activities are suspended for the day, students have still been required to sit their exams and submit their assignments, and casual academics are still required to mark them.

Speeches from union representatives have provided no analysis or way forward for workers, beyond denunciations of management and calls for more

strikes. While union and pseudo-left speakers occasionally mention the Labor government or war drive in passing, they make no calls to oppose the government and its corporatist and militarist agenda.

Workers on the USYD picket who spoke to CFPE members last Wednesday raised their hostility to the workloads imposed on staff. One academic who has an EFR position said some of her colleagues have “unimaginable” workloads, including one who must coordinate four units this semester. She opposed EFRs, saying “academics are not just for teaching—academics need to do research at the same time.”

When asked about the danger of war, she said: “There is no good war, they all have terrible consequences.” She added: “China doesn’t present a military threat to Australia. I would feel more comfortable if the government engaged in dialogue not just with China but any other nation, rather than build up a military presence. I don’t feel safer because we have nuclear weapons in our country.”

While Hambides and other supporters of the Socialist Equality Party have been prevented from speaking at strike rallies, Labor and Greens parliamentarians, such as Mark Buttigieg and Mehreen Faruqi, have been given a platform by the NTEU. Their parties collaborated under the previous Greens-backed Gillard Labor government to implement a pro-market “education revolution” and then inflict punishing cuts to university funding in 2013.

At Wednesday’s strike rally, Reimer told Hambides he would not be added to the speakers’ list, “because you’ve been encouraging people to leave the union.” Hambides said that was a false claim. The CFPE is fighting for the formation of rank-and-file committees to take power out of the hands of the union bureaucrats.

Hambides pointed to the call from the CFPE for a broadening of the strike, but Reimer interrupted saying: “Not interested, not interested, [I’m] not interested in your version [of escalating the strike].”

This anti-democratic censorship is a warning of what the unions and their pseudo-left partners will seek to do to any worker who criticises the union’s role. If not blocked from speaking, Hambides would have explained that the Albanese Labor government is leading the attack on university education through the Universities Accord, which aims to further the commercialisation and militarisation of universities as

it steps up its commitment to join a US-led war against China.

According to his prepared remarks, Hambides would have called for “genuine rank-and-file committees to take forward and unite the struggles of educators across Australia and internationally. These must be completely independent from the harassment and betrayals of the union bureaucracy and leadership. These committees would aim to unify with other workers in other industries, who all face the same kinds of attacks due to the breakdown of the capitalist system.”



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