Stop union sellout of University of Sydney workers! Form a rank-and-file committee to fight for job security, workload reduction and real pay increases!

Committee for Public Education
17 April 2023

For 21 months, University of Sydney (USYD) academics and staff have been engaged in one of the longest-running current industrial disputes in Australia, but their struggle is now in great danger. Workers have reached an impasse, because their fight has long been isolated and worn down by the trade unions.

Academic and professional workers who are members of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) have carried out nine days of repeated one-day or two-day strikes to oppose the management's demands for deeper cuts to real wages and working conditions. Yet management's "final offer," issued on April 6, has hardly budged from its aggressive agenda.

Meanwhile, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), which also covers professional staff, has done nothing to support the struggle, even though the management's proposed enterprise agreement will be imposed on the university's entire workforce of up to 15,000 workers.

Now the NTEU has called a members' meeting at USYD on Tuesday where for the first time the union branch committee—while a majority is nominally calling for possible further strikes—is tabling a motion, proposed by a minority on the committee, to openly accept the management's core demands.

The only alternative advanced by the committee majority is for three more days of strikes on May 1–3, but even that limited action is likely to be called off. According to an email to union members from USYD branch president Nick Reimer, the stoppages will only occur "if management refuse to make satisfactory progress on our key campaign focuses, including pay."

While the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators' network, urges the rejection of the blatantly defeatist minority resolution, we warn that the majority motion is also a recipe for a betrayal, simply designed to delay action for another two weeks in order to reach a rotten deal with management.

Left in the hands of the NTEU and the branch committee, the dispute will continue to be isolated to one university, further worn down and limited to negotiating with the management on its terms, not the urgent needs of university workers.

While critically supporting the majority motion, and backing industrial action by workers, we will move an amendment to add the following to the majority resolution: "That this meeting calls for the formation of a rank-and-file committee to take forward the fight for a broader struggle based on the development of demands to meet the needs of workers and students, not corporate profit. Such demands should include:

- Annual pay rises, well in excess of inflation to ensure that workers do not go backwards, and to catch up on past losses
- Restoration of all jobs eliminated, including from 2020 to 2022
- Reduction of intolerable workloads that make genuine research or professional development impossible
- The right of all casualised university workers, many of whom have eked out an insecure existence for years, to secure and permanent employment if they want it
- Protection from the COVID pandemic, including safe, ventilated facilities and the right to work from home
- Free first-class education for all students, instead of the government pouring billions of dollars into preparations for more US-led wars

On this basis, the rank-and-file committee would make calls and send delegations appealing to CPSU members and all university staff and students at USYD and across the country to join the struggle."

Despite their professed differences, both the majority and minority motions falsely claim that the NTEU campaign at USYD has made great gains. According to Reimer, "there are certainly many things to be proud of." This is clearly laying the basis for a sellout.

What are these things "to be proud of"?

- A real wage cut. Despite almost two years of stoppages, management's wage offer still averages only 4.275 percent

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annually for four years with no back pay, despite official inflation reaching 7.8 percent in the December quarter.

• While Reimer claims that the NTEU has “completely averted” an assault on the traditional academic workload allocation of 40 percent teaching, 40 percent research, and 20 percent administration, management will have the right to “encourage” academics to increase their teaching load.

• Management says it will create 330 new academic positions, after axing hundreds since 2020. But of those, 220 will be “education-focused” roles that all but eliminate the ability of academics to conduct research.

• No guaranteed conversion of casual academics into permanent roles. Management reserves the right not to hire any casual academics if they don’t “demonstrate[e] the requirements for the positions.”

• The management’s offensive has come on top of three years of the unprecedented destruction of jobs, pay and conditions across all Australian universities since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, while the unions have blocked any unified struggle.

Management has clearly waited for the result of the NSW elections before issuing their final offer, which is, in fact, an almost identical to the deal presented nearly two years ago. The election of the Chris Minns Labor government, which has signalled that it will work with the unions to impose austerity cuts to wages and conditions, has provided the green light for management to proceed with their original agenda.

This stifling role of the unions has only intensified for the more than two years since 2021, when the latest enterprise bargaining process began. The NTEU and CPSU have done everything they can to isolate disputes and push through retrograde deals at several universities, fraudulently presenting them as “big victories.”

The NTEU and its branch committee are moving to shut down the USYD dispute precisely at the point where it has the potential to become a spearhead for a broader fight throughout the university sector and the working class as a whole against the deepening real pay-cutting and cost-of-living crisis being imposed by the employers, the financial markets and the federal Labor government.

To defeat another betrayal, USYD workers need to take their struggle into their own hands and turn out to educators and workers in Australia and internationally. That means forming rank-and-file committees of staff and students to develop a mass movement against the program of “sacrifice” and austerity, and massive war spending, being implemented by the Labor government and other capitalist governments around the world.

That inevitably means taking a stand against the Labor government and the ruling class as a whole. This is part of a wider necessary struggle against capitalism and to reorganise society along genuinely democratic and egalitarian, that is socialist, lines in the interests of humanity, not the soaring profits and wealth accumulation of billionaires.

There is a powerful objective basis for such a struggle. In France, the UK and across Europe, millions of workers are engaged in strikes and protests against governments imposing the dictates of the corporate ruling class, including the overwhelmingly hated pension cuts of French President Macron. In both the US and UK, academics have taken powerful strike action over poor pay, job security, working conditions and pensions.

In Australia, teachers, nurses and other health workers have joined statewide strikes against low pay, intolerable workloads, dire staff shortages and unsafe conditions, only for the union bureaucrats to shut them down. Across the country, the unions are barely able to contain the discontent brewing up, including among construction workers, as the social and housing crisis worsens rapidly.

A warning must be issued. The USYD NTEU branch leadership is led by members or supporters of two pseudo-left groups, Solidarity and Socialist Alternative, which actively seek to prop up the union apparatuses and insist that workers must not break out of their straitjacket.

On multiple occasions, the branch executive has blocked Zac Hambides, a USYD worker and member of the CFPE, from speaking at picket rallies and in union meetings to call for a broader struggle throughout the working class. This is a warning of the anti-democratic methods the union and its pseudo-left lieutenants will use to try to suppress opposition.

The CFPE urges USYD workers to reject such censorship and discuss with us the need to build rank-and-file committees, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-file Committees initiated by the Socialist Equality Parties to unite workers globally in the struggle against the bankrupt capitalist profit system. To discuss how to form rank-and-file committees, and obtain help to do so, please contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com
Facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/678929646894212
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Twitter: @CFPE_Australia

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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