

Unions seek to impose sellout at University of Sydney

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A thoroughly anti-democratic meeting conducted by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) at the University of Sydney (USYD) on April 18 resulted in a bitter split vote by those NTEU members who were present to accept the union's proposed sellout of a nearly two-year fight against management's wage-cutting and attacks on conditions.

This betrayal still can and must be defeated. But the outcome of the meeting, and the manner in which it was cynically orchestrated by the NTEU bureaucrats and the pseudo-left majority on the university's NTEU branch committee, demonstrates one thing very clearly.

That is, in order to defeat this betrayal, university workers need to take the struggle out of these hands and into their own, starting with the formation of a rank-and-file committee to lead a "vote no" campaign in the all-staff ballot that must be held on whatever agreement is finalised by the NTEU with management.

That committee needs to be open to all university workers, including members of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), which 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.

At the April 18 meeting the NTEU branch committee tabled a motion, proposed by a minority on the committee, to openly accept the management's "final offer," which has hardly budged from its aggressive cost-cutting and restructuring agenda.

The only alternative advanced by the committee majority, made up of members or supporters of pseudo-left groups, was for three more days of isolated strikes on May 1–3, and only if management failed to marginally improve its offer, which both the majority and minority factions falsely claimed represented great gains "to be proud of."

Faced with that false choice, between naked capitulation and another backroom bid for a rotten deal with management, the meeting—consisting of only about 600 NTEU members—rejected the majority motion, with 337 (54 percent) voting against, and 245 (39 percent) in favour, and 40 abstaining. The minority motion then passed, paving the way for the NTEU to accept management's terms.

But this was only possible because the NTEU branch committee bureaucratically refused to put to the meeting an amendment to the majority motion proposed by the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators' rank-and-file network, which provided the

only way forward.

The CFPE amendment called for the formation of a rank-and-file committee to take forward a broader struggle based on the development of demands to meet the needs of workers and students, not corporate profit. It said such demands should include:

- Annual pay rises, well in excess of inflation 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

It ended: "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."

The amendment was blocked first by an NTEU bureaucrat, who claimed the union lacked the resources to email it to members before the meeting, then by branch president Nick Reimer, a supporter of the pseudo-left Solidarity group, who chaired the meeting and refused to give CFPE member Zac Hambides the floor to move the amendment.

This confirmed the warning made by the CFPE in a statement distributed at the meeting that the NTEU was seeking to initiate a betrayal at precisely the point where the dispute "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."

Far from an offer "to be proud of," the management's ultimatum features:

- A real wage cut. Management's wage offer still averages only 4.275 percent annually for four years with no back pay, despite official inflation remaining at 7 percent.
- An ongoing assault on the traditional academic workload allocation of 40 percent teaching, 40 percent research, and 20

percent administration, with management asserting the right to “encourage” academics to increase their teaching load.

- The supposed creation of 330 new academic positions, after hundreds were axed from 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 do not demonstrate “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.

At the April 18 meeting, the first hour was mainly devoted to the union leadership aggressively lecturing members on the danger of taking further strike action.

NTEU general secretary Damien Cahill spearheaded the offensive. He warned of the risk of the management conducting a staff ballot on its offer without NTEU endorsement or “an intractable bargaining dispute.” The latter refers to the Albanese Labor government’s new industrial relations laws, which Cahill and others repeatedly invoked to intimidate workers.

This exposes the real anti-strike thrust of Labor’s laws, and how the trade union bureaucrats willingly enforce them. The legislation allows the Fair Work Commission (FWC) the pro-employer industrial tribunal, to shut down any dispute it declares “intractable.” Workers will then have their wages and conditions directly imposed by the FWC or decided in backroom negotiations between employers and union officials.

Cahill also used previous NTEU betrayals to try to justify another sellout. He claimed that in any non-union ballot, management could “point out that their offer is superior to any other NTEU-endorsed offer at any other university.” The first rotten deal the NTEU struck in the current round of enterprise bargaining was at Western Sydney University last year. It included a sub-inflation wage rise averaging 3.5 percent annually, with the NTEU fraudulently depicting the outcome as a “big win.”

While Cahill and the branch committee minority advocated immediate submission to management, the role of the majority, which included Reimer, was to ensure no real alternative was presented.

In his lengthy president’s report, Reimer attempted to blame members for increasingly ineffective strikes, in which the NTEU and the branch committee made no appeal to non-union workers, CPSU members, or staff at other campuses to join the stoppages, and the pickets only ran until lunch time.

Reimer told the meeting: “We think we need significantly more members to strike and picket to win breakthroughs.” But for months, Reimer opposed and blocked repeated calls by CFPE members for the struggle to be broadened across the university sector and throughout the working class as a whole.

Reimer complained that management’s offer meant workers in “education-focused” roles would be “overworked.” Yet the NTEU only proposed that these roles be confined to 20 percent of the

permanent academic workforce, while management is demanding 25 percent.

In the truncated question and answer session, Reimer refused to allow members to make comments, including by cutting off the first one, who tried to oppose Cahill’s threats of a non-union ballot.

John Buchanan, who moved the minority motion, declared: “It would take an industrial campaign the likes of which we have never seen at this university before,” to shift the management’s offer. He completely ruled that out. NTEU industrial officer Simon Kempton again invoked Labor’s industrial laws, saying any escalation of industrial action would lead “to contested arbitration.”

The “majority” had no answer outside of continuing isolated strikes. Reimer also emphasised there was a “risk” in further strikes. “It depends on our ability to mobilise,” he said, again effectively blaming members for the impasse that the NTEU and the committee had led them into.

The NTEU branch leadership is led by members or supporters of two pseudo-left groups, Solidarity and Socialist Alternative (NTEU Fightback), which actively seek to prop up the NTEU and other trade union apparatuses and insist that workers must not break out of their legal and organisational straitjacket and partnership with pro-business Labor governments.

The CFPE is urging USYD workers to discuss with us the need to build a rank-and-file committee to defeat the proposed NTEU-CPSU sellout. This would link up to 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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