

Australian university union blocks call by CFPE members for broader struggle

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At a stopwork meeting at Sydney's Macquarie University last Wednesday, National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) leaders prevented two staff members from presenting a resolution calling for a broader struggle against the real pay cutting, casualisation and corporate restructuring taking place across Australia's public universities.

With the visible backing of NTEU national secretary Damien Cahill, who was present, Macquarie NTEU branch president Nick Harrigan blocked well-known NTEU and Committee for Public Education (CFPE) member Carolyn Kennett from speaking by refusing to hand over the microphone.

It was a blatant act of political censorship, showing that the NTEU bureaucrats are intent on stifling the democratic rights of members to dissent and oppose their actions as they rush to push through sell-out enterprise bargaining deals with managements at one university after the other.

Copies of the CFPE resolution were widely circulated among the 200 or so striking workers at the stopwork meeting, as part of a statement, "Form a rank-and-file committee to prevent a sellout and take forward the fight at Sydney's Macquarie University."

Based on that statement, Kennett and another CFPE member, Chris Gordon, planned to call for joint action with educators at the University of NSW, where a 24-hour stoppage was being held the same day, and University of Newcastle, where a similar strike was being held the next day, in order to break through the isolation of each struggle by the NTEU.

The anti-democratic suppression of discussion has been condemned by those who witnessed it. A casual lecturer told the WSWs: "That is inherently wrong. You shouldn't shut people up, or prevent them from raising important matters, especially if they [the NTEU] say it was a meeting."

He added: "I agree with united action of workers. It is important that workers in different organisations of the same industry are informed of what is happening in that industry. At the universities that includes not only the academics and admin staff, but also the cleaning workers, food stall workers, and every person who works in the university."

Harrigan's censorship was clearly pre-meditated. On May 26, the Friday before the stopwork meeting, he had personally contacted Kennett and Gordon in consecutive phone calls. He

asked if they were attending the stopwork meeting, underscoring the NTEU officials' fear of any opposition.

Last Monday, two days before the meeting, Gordon sent the NTEU office a copy of the CFPE resolution, which was similar to one that Harrigan had blocked, equally anti-democratically, at an earlier members' meeting on May 17. Gordon received no reply, even after calling the NTEU office on the day of the meeting.

Kennett and Gordon then approached Harrigan before the start of the stopwork meeting, foreshadowing a procedural motion to discuss the CFPE resolution. Harrigan, accompanied by Josh Andrews, an NTEU industrial officer, claimed that the stopwork meeting, for which members had voted, was now a "rally," so no motions could be put.

When the CFPE members protested, referring to the NTEU's standing orders for members' meetings, Andrews declared that this was "not a general meeting," so the standing orders did not apply. A request by Kennett and Gordon to be placed on the speakers' list was also denied.

After Harrigan made opening remarks at the meeting, Kennett raised her hand to speak but was ignored. She then walked onto the platform. Harrigan quickly handed the microphone to James Hazleton, the NTEU branch's lead negotiator with management, who physically made sure that Kennett could not access the microphone.

Undeterred, Kennett addressed the audience, highlighting the anti-democratic censorship and calling for dissent from the chair, as provided for in the NTEU's standing orders. Andrews attempted to drown her out with a chant.

Harrigan reclaimed the microphone from Hazleton, again refusing to let Kennett be heard. Cahill, the NTEU general secretary, approached Harrigan and whispered to him, whereupon Harrigan called for a vote on whether Kennett should "no longer be heard."

Harrigan declared his motion passed without even asking for those voting against and without a count, having denied Kennett the right to speak to it. Most workers were not even sure what was going on. The only people who voted were union branch officials or close supporters down the front. After this utterly bureaucratic display, Harrigan cynically declared "goodbye" to Kennett.

Andrews, the NTEU industrial officer, again led a chant of “let James speak.” Hazleton took back the microphone, physically moving it away from Kennett, and declared, “we just had a vote” before proceeding with his remarks.

At Macquarie, like everywhere else, the NTEU has made clear that it will not fight for any pay rise to match inflation, claiming that to be unrealistic. Likewise, it is claiming to limit job-destroying measures (“change proposals”) by merely requiring management to state what work will be done and by whom after a restructuring. This is not opposition but union facilitation and participation in job destruction.

Similarly, the NTEU’s proposal offers permanence only to fixed-term staff members after two years of continuous employment and to 100 casual employees throughout a three-year agreement, condemning most of the remaining 70 percent of staff to precarious and insecure job tenure.

In order to strike a deal with management, the NTEU has restricted industrial action to the two-hour stop-work meeting and some minor work bans. This is despite a ballot in May in which 97 percent of union members supported taking industrial action, with 77 percent voting for indefinite stoppages.

This was not an individual act, but NTEU policy. The union leaders are desperate to silence any opposition to their record of striking retrograde deals with management. CFPE members have been similarly censored at University of Sydney and Western Sydney University. The union apparatus acts in tandem with managements and as their policemen against its own members.

The lesson which needs to be drawn from these experiences is that not a step forward can be taken by workers while shackled by the union leaders to the interests of management.

The CFPE resolution is critical to breaking through this straitjacket. It calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees in order to link workers across universities in a unified struggle based on the development of demands that meet the needs of workers and students.

These demands, outlined in the CFPE resolution, would include:

- pay increases surpassing inflation to compensate for past losses
- the reinstatement of all jobs eliminated since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic
- secure employment for all casualised university workers
- the abolition of excessive workloads
- free first-class education for all students instead of channelling billions of dollars into preparations for US-led wars.

What was the union so afraid of the CFPE members saying? The CFPE statement called for the formation of a rank-and-file committee, independent of the unions, to take forward the fight at Macquarie, across all universities and throughout the working class, against real wage cuts, casualisation and intolerable conditions.

The statement warned: “Left in the hands of the NTEU and its Macquarie branch committee, there will be another sell-out deal with management, just like the one being pushed by the NTEU national leadership at USyd, which inflicts a sub-inflation pay agreement and provides no guarantee of permanency for casuals.

“Instead, the dispute at Macquarie can and must become part of a wider counter-offensive by educators and other workers. That includes the public health workers taking action in New South Wales on May 31 [the same day] against the state Labor government’s below-inflation pay ‘rise’ for public sector workers.”

While silencing the CFPE members, the NTEU gave the platform over to two members of a pseudo-left group, Macquarie Socialists. After refusing to defend Kennett’s right to speak, Steven Hansen and Will Glen heaped praise on the NTEU, falsely portraying it as seeking to defend educators’ conditions.

Such fake “left” groups are trying to cover up the NTEU’s role, which includes allowing the elimination of at least 350 full-time jobs at Macquarie in 2020?21. This was part of a wave of tens of thousands of layoffs, facilitated by the NTEU, that shocked and angered university workers.

What happened last Wednesday is another warning that a further betrayal is being prepared at Macquarie. Staff and students must take matters into their own hands and reach out to educators and workers both domestically and internationally. This necessitates the establishment of an independent rank-and-file committee of staff and students. For assistance in establishing rank-and-file committees, 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:

wsws.org/contact