

Open letter of protest to Australia's National Tertiary Education Union

Carolyn Kennett
8 June 2023

The following open letter by Carolyn Kennett, a Macquarie University member of the NTEU and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators' network, has been sent to Nicholas Harrigan, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) branch president at Macquarie, and NTEU officials.

The letter protests against these NTEU representatives anti-democratically preventing Kennett and fellow CFPE member Chris Gordon from presenting a CFPE resolution to a May 31 NTEU members' stopwork meeting at Macquarie. That resolution called for the formation of a rank-and-file committee to stop another union sellout at Macquarie and fight 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, Harrigan blocked Kennett, a well-known NTEU and CFPE member, from speaking by refusing to hand over the microphone. This 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.

At Macquarie, as at other universities, the NTEU has made clear that it will not fight for any pay rise to match inflation, claiming that to be unrealistic, and is proposing an enterprise agreement that will allow job-destroying restructuring to continue and leave the vast majority of casual workers in precarious and insecure jobs.

We urge our readers to support and circulate Kennett's open letter, the May 29 CFPE statement and resolution and to contact the CFPE to help establish rank-and-file committees at Macquarie and throughout the university sector to take forward the fight against union sellouts and for a broader struggle across all universities, and

throughout the working class, against real wage cuts, casualisation and intolerable conditions.

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: @CFPE_Australia

To Nicholas Harrigan,

CC: Joshua Andrews, Damien Cahill

I am writing this open letter to protest against the anti-democratic and bureaucratic measures that were taken against me and a fellow member of the union and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) at the NTEU members' stopwork meeting on Wednesday of last week.

I have been a member of the NTEU for 25 years and have previously been both a branch president at Macquarie University and a national councillor. The methods used by yourself, Josh Andrews and Damien Cahill to silence me were in complete opposition to democratic discussion and debate.

Prior to the meeting, you arbitrarily refused to put our motion, which we had foreshadowed to the union office, to the meeting for discussion. You declared that the stopwork meeting, for which members had voted two weeks earlier, was now deemed to be a "rally" with a speakers' list already assigned. We requested to be put on the speakers' list and again you refused.

When did this transformation from a stopwork meeting and rally, voted on by members, to a "rally" occur? Did it take place after I and the CFPE foreshadowed our intention to move a motion calling for the formation of a rank-and-file committee? Who made the decision? Where is it stipulated that the standing orders of stopwork meetings and rallies differ?

It should be noted that these anti-democratic methods are not limited to the Macquarie University NTEU branch but have been an ongoing feature of the stopwork

meetings held over almost two years at Sydney University where other CFPE members have been silenced. The purpose of this is to intimidate all NTEU members from opposing the union leadership and its sell-outs.

Members have the right to express disagreements with the branch committee (and the national office), which is a right enshrined in the standing orders for meetings. In such cases, the member dissenting to a ruling should be given the right to speak before a vote is taken. Instead, you refused to give me access to the microphone and put a motion that I be silenced, and then denied me the opportunity to respond. Nor was a proper count taken before you declared it passed. In fact, you didn't even call for a vote against it despite the fact that many members at the meeting had not voted as they were not clear on what was happening.

Your actions on May 31 are not the only example of the anti-democratic measures you and the NTEU leadership have used to silence us. In the members' meeting on May 17, you undemocratically opposed our procedural motion to ensure adequate time was allocated to debate our resolution and any other motions from members.

You also declared that the motion, foreshadowed by the CFPE, was a "counter motion" to the motion for very limited industrial action. It was clearly not a "counter motion." It called for a unified struggle of all university workers across the country. Declaring the CFPE motion a "counter motion" was clearly a manoeuvre to stop it from being put, discussed and voted on.

At an NTEU meeting in 2018, the union members voted for a CFPE motion that opposed "the splitting up of university employees, via individual Enterprise Agreements and called for a unified national struggle against the (then) Liberal-National government's latest multi-billion dollar cuts, and the overturning of all previous cuts imposed by both Labor and Coalition governments." The union did not circulate or act upon this motion, blatantly defying the meeting's vote for the motion to be circulated throughout the sector.

We have been told repeatedly at meetings through the current enterprise agreement process that it is the members who decide. This is a lie.

In December, members voted for a ballot for industrial action. That was not acted upon by the union until the end of April, some five months later. Members voted for a motion that called for a pay increase of inflation plus 1.5 percent, but at the May 17 meeting, we were told that we had to be realistic. It wasn't going to happen.

The willingness of workers to take forward a fight was

evident, given that 97 percent of staff voted for industrial action and 77 percent voted for indefinite stoppages. Members were not given the right to decide on the motion we wanted to put at the stopwork meeting. Like other decisions, this was made by the NTEU bureaucrats.

The anti-democratic measures taken against me are of a piece with the NTEU's contempt for its members. You are straitjacketing workers, denying the right of the rank and file to develop a counter-offensive against the deepening assault on our wages and conditions.

At the May 31 stopwork meeting, you buried the fact that the University of New South Wales NTEU members were on a full-day strike at the same time as the stopwork meeting and that the University of Newcastle was on strike the following day.

We are putting forward a unified struggle against the attacks on workers' pay and conditions. We are fighting to put power back into the hands of the rank and file by establishing independent committees that will allow the fullest democratic discussion, debate and decision-making in order to take forward this critical struggle.

I am a proud member of the Committee for Public Education and a socialist. I have a long record of fighting for the rights of workers in education across all levels and the rights of students to have access to free high-quality education properly funded.

The CFPE demands that the NTEU leadership cease its suppression of opposition by NTEU members throughout all university actions and meetings. We insist you provide a written guarantee, to the membership, that such censorship will not occur again.

I await your reply,
Carolyn Kennett



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact