

Rank-and-file committees must be built at Australian universities against genocide, war, cuts and corporate control

Committee for Public Education
9 February 2024

As the 2024 academic year begins, tertiary education staff and students alike face huge political issues.

Above all, there is the escalating Israeli genocide in Gaza, backed by all the imperialist governments, including the Albanese government, and the rising danger of wider disastrous US-instigated wars against Iran, Russia and China. That is despite massive protests, week after week, in Australia and globally against the slaughter of now more than 30,000 Palestinians.

Universities, schools, educators and students are among Israel's central targets, along with hospitals, health workers and journalists. That included the January 17 demolition of Israa University in Gaza City—the last standing university in the besieged enclave.

Israel is obliterating the entire educational infrastructure in Gaza and aiming to make the destruction permanent. It has destroyed or damaged as many as 350 schools. According to the UN, at least 4,327 students have been killed and 7,819 injured. As of January 24, 231 teachers or administrators had been killed and 756 wounded.

This descent into barbarism and the danger of world war has threatening implications for universities and public education everywhere. In Australia, the Labor government has already allocated hundreds of billions of dollars for AUKUS and other war preparations while cutting funding and subjugating universities to the demands of big business and the war plans.

On top of that is the soaring cost of living and studying, which is causing immense financial and housing stress, and the blatant ruling class indifference to lives in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the climate catastrophe. In the past year, at least one academic, Niko Tiliopoulos at the University of Sydney, has been publicly sacked—despite thousands of students and staff opposing his removal—for not teaching face-to-face due to severe respiratory and autoimmune conditions that mean he cannot risk catching COVID.

None of these threats are, or will be, addressed by the campus trade unions, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU). In fact, these union apparatuses are committed to shoring up the pro-

business Labor government in the face of deepening political discontent.

These unions have opposed action by university workers or any other section of the working class to halt the Gaza genocide. The NTEU adopted a resolution on October 20, 2023, that echoed the statements of the Biden administration and the Albanese government, insisting that Israel has the right to “defend” itself while shedding crocodile tears over the wholesale massacre of Palestinians.

University workers, together with students, must form new organisations in order to fight the corporate-government agenda of genocide, war and sacrifice. They should take up and circulate as widely as possible a resolution adopted by a forum in December hosted by the Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee.

That resolution, first issued on November 27 by the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators' network established by the Socialist Equality Party, denounces the genocide being perpetrated against the Palestinian people by the Zionist state of Israel and its imperialist backers, including the Albanese government.

The CFPE resolution condemns “the inaction of the teacher and university unions, whose silence amounts to an endorsement of the Albanese government's support for Israel.” It supports “the call of the Palestinian trade unions for global solidarity, halting the arms trade with Israel as well as funding and military research.”

The Macquarie rank-and-file committee was formed in 2023 in response to the CFPE's call for the formation of such action committees to fight for the interests of staff, students and the working class as a whole, against those of the ruling capitalist class. These committees are seeking to unify with workers across Australia and internationally, through the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

The Macquarie committee's founding statement set out essential initial demands. They included:

- free first-class education for all students instead of channelling billions of dollars into preparations for US-led wars
- the right to conduct research that is not influenced by the

profit demands of corporate interests, government interference or the demands of the military apparatus

the reinstatement of all jobs eliminated by decades of funding cuts, including the thousands of jobs eliminated during the COVID-19 pandemic

secure employment for all casualised university workers who want it

- pay increases surpassing inflation to compensate for past losses

Having blocked any sector-wide struggle against the destructive cuts to jobs and courses during the first three years of the COVID pandemic—in fact they volunteered job and wage cuts—the union bureaucracies peddled the illusion that a Labor government would rectify the damage, or at least could be pressured into doing so.

Instead, according to the government’s own budget papers, higher education expenditure is expected to decrease by more than 9 percent in real terms from 2021–22 to 2024–25. That is on top of a \$10 billion cut to university funding over the past 15 years, starting with the Rudd-Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013.

At the same time, the Labor government is further integrating the universities into the war effort. In November, it announced an additional 4,001 Commonwealth-supported places in STEM courses “to help grow the skilled workforce required to deliver the AUKUS nuclear-powered submarine pathway.”

That followed a week-long visit to Washington in April by Universities Australia chief executive Catriona Jackson to “cement” the role of the universities in the AUKUS war preparations against China. Her meetings also discussed protecting the “security” of military research through repressive measures, such as banning collaborations with Chinese researchers.

The union leaders claimed that Labor’s Universities Accord review, which featured Australia’s highest-paid CEO, Macquarie banking group’s Shemara Wikramanayake, would provide a vehicle for improving university funding.

In reality, the central thrust of July’s interim Accord report was a fundamental restructuring of universities to satisfy the requirements of the corporate elite and preparations for war. “Courses must be designed with the skill needs of industry in mind,” the report insisted. It specifically nominated the “AUKUS nuclear submarine program” as a field with an “urgent need to train enough highly-skilled researchers.”

Far from opposing the Labor government’s agenda, the NTEU’s submission to the Accord panel was fully aligned with its pro-business objectives. It called for a higher education sector that “provides the graduates with the necessary skill sets for future productivity.”

Education Minister Jason Clare has yet to release the final Accord report. But it is already clear that it will not include any reversal of research and other funding cuts. Nor will there be any fee relief for students.

The NTEU and CPSU apparatuses performed a similar role under the previous Rudd and Gillard Labor governments. Propped up by the Greens, Labor implemented a pro-business “education revolution.” This market-driven regime has forced universities to rely on under-paid and insecure casual or fixed-term staff and depend on milking full-fee paying international students.

The union leaders have spent the past year pushing through retrograde enterprise agreements, inflicting further sub-inflationary pay deals in line with the demands of the Albanese government, and paving the way for more pro-corporate restructuring. The union apparatuses have isolated and worn down all outbreaks of determined resistance, including lengthy strikes at the Universities of Sydney and Melbourne.

Supposed NTEU “victories” in securing full-time jobs for some casual teachers were shams. They effectively created new, more exploited categories of academics and left management the right to pick and choose which, if any, of the casuals is “appointable.”

As a result of the betrayals of the unions over many years, their membership is imploding. But quitting the unions in disgust is not an answer in itself. Staff and students must take matters into their own hands. For that, rank-and-file committees—new genuine democratic organisations of struggle—have to be built.

This is part of a broader necessary struggle against the capitalist profit system, aimed at reorganising society along truly democratic and egalitarian, that is, socialist, lines in the interests of humanity, not the soaring wealth of billionaires and preparations for catastrophic US-led wars.

If you agree with our call, please contact us to discuss how to form rank-and-file committees and obtain help to do so:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

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