

Australian election: National Tertiary Education Union covers up Labor's role in university crisis

Mike Head, SEP candidate for the seat of Oxley
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In a series of media statements and events, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) leaders have joined hands with their primary and secondary teacher trade union counterparts to promote the Australian Labor Party as the party of choice for education in the May 3 federal election.

By once again backing Labor, as they have for decades, the union bureaucrats are covering up Labor's long record of cutting public education funding in real terms at all levels, as well as the Albanese government's agenda of suppressing anti-genocide dissent and further transforming the public universities along pro-business and pro-military lines.

Via a media release, for example, the NTEU announced that it "strongly condemns the [opposition Liberal-National] Coalition's announcement to reduce international student numbers by 25 percent, warning the policy will devastate the higher education sector, threaten thousands of jobs, and undermine Australia's research capability and international standing."

This is sheer hypocrisy.

The NTEU is saying this in the face of more than 2,000 job cuts already throughout the public universities as a direct result of the Labor government's own punishing caps imposed by decree on international student enrolments, on top of its continued chronic under-funding of the universities.

Just last week, defying staff outrage, the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) confirmed the latest such attack. It is setting out to axe 400 jobs—150 academics and 250 professional staff—or nearly 10 percent of the entire UTS workforce.

For months, similar cuts have been unveiled at universities across the country.

This includes up to 650 jobs at the Australian National University (ANU), 200 at the University of Canberra, at least 150 at the University of Wollongong and many more at other universities, such as Federation, James Cook, Southern Queensland, Griffith, La Trobe, Tasmania and Swinburne.

At Sydney's Macquarie University likewise, the vice-chancellor recently announced a "repositioning" of its workforce. Courses and programs of study deemed less attractive to students are under threat, as are the staff who teach in those programs.

At Western Sydney University (WSU), where I work, the NTEU has assisted the management to set a chilling precedent by slashing the workforce at WSU College and imposing nightmarish

conditions on educators and students, cramming entire subjects into four-week blocks.

This week, the WSU management foreshadowed up to 400 job losses, or 15 percent of the workforce across the university. That confirms the warnings issued by rank-and-file committees at WSU and Macquarie, established with the political assistance of the Socialist Equality Party, that the WSU College restructuring is a test case for the sector as a whole.

The NTEU leadership has opposed any unified fight against this job destruction, just as they did during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. They also have refused to condemn Labor's reactionary attack on international students, which has sought to make them scapegoats for the housing and cost-of-living crisis that is devastating working-class households.

The NTEU fails to mention the fact that the Albanese government last year issued a ministerial direction to slash international enrolments. Comparing the Labor and Coalition policies, there is an estimated difference of about 5 percent in the proposed number of students. In other words, the policies are almost identical.

The reality is that Labor and the Coalition are competing to blame international students, along with migrant workers and refugees, for the social crisis, thus seeking to divide the working class along nationalist lines.

At the same time, the NTEU and other education union leaders are seeking to divert the widespread educators' opposition to the US Trump administration's outright dismantling of public education and frontal assault on free speech back into the hands of the Labor government.

In an April 3 media release, NTEU national president Alison Barnes stated: "We don't want Trumpian politics here. Australians look at what is happening in the US with alarm."

But in March, the Albanese government urged Australian researchers to comply with a questionnaire sent by the Trump administration. The White House threatened to cut off jointly-funded projects that conflicted with its aggression against China and its offensive against science, public health, public education, environmental protection and diversity, equity and inclusion programs.

The truth is that Labor, led by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, has refused to criticise, let alone oppose, the Trump

regime's fascistic agenda, which also features an all-out trade war against China and full backing for the escalating Israeli genocide in Palestine.

Instead, Albanese is vying with Coalition leader Peter Dutton to claim to be the best to cooperate with the Trump White House, including on the AUKUS military front against China.

Universities Australia, the employers' group, reported last year that funding for universities had fallen in real terms by \$2 billion since 2020. The Labor government is using this financial squeeze to enforce its Universities Accord, which demands that universities subordinate both their teaching and research to the "national priorities" of big business and preparations for war, such as the AUKUS pact.

The NTEU is trying to shield the Labor government by claiming that the avalanche of job cuts is simply due to mismanagement and excessive executive salaries. Barnes said, for example: "What's unfolding at ANU is a direct result of a national university governance crisis, which allows unaccountable vice-chancellors on a million dollars a year to wreak the havoc on our public institutions."

In reality, the Labor government is wreaking havoc, including by backing an historic assault on free speech. It has backed university managements at the University of Sydney and elsewhere in moving to prohibit any form of political dissent on campus, particularly against the US-backed Israeli atrocities in the Middle East.

At Macquarie University, Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah, a well-known sociologist, has become a prominent victim of the escalating witch hunt, at the direct behest of the Labor government, which instructed the Australian Research Council to freeze her research grant, thus exposing her to dismissal.

In the Socialist Equality Party's election statement, we warn: "The repression goes far beyond the immediate question of Gaza. It attempts to create a wartime atmosphere and strengthen the state apparatus in preparation for conflict with China. All elements of civil society, from the schools and universities to the economy, are to be subordinated to the military build-up. Preparations are doubtless being made for measures similar to those imposed in Australia during the two imperialist world wars of last century, when 'enemy aliens' were subjected to mass internment and socialist and anti-war activists were jailed."

Labor has a long record of forcing universities to integrate themselves more fully with big business and the needs of the corporate elite, going back to the Hawke government's imposition of fees on both international and domestic students in the 1980s.

The Greens-backed Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013 implemented the market-driven "education revolution" which forced universities to compete for students and rely on international student fees. University courses were increasingly tailored to meet the demands of big business for skilled labour, productivity and profits.

Now, under Albanese, the universities are being more deeply integrated into the preparations for war. The military secrets laws that were pushed through parliament last year by Labor and the Coalition, for example, mean that researchers are in danger of being prosecuted for collaborating with overseas colleagues from

proscribed countries such as Russia, Iran and China.

Opposition exists throughout the universities to the job destruction, course closures, pro-corporate restructuring and suppression of dissent. But the NTEU leaders and those of the other main campus union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), have for years opposed any unified fight by university staff and students.

That is why we are calling for the formation of rank-and-file committees (RFCs) at every university. University staff, along with students, need to form their own organisations of struggle to develop and fight for demands based on the educational and financial needs of students and staff.

Students have the essential social right to a decent, all-round critical education and educators and researchers should have the opportunity to conduct genuinely socially useful and scientifically important teaching and research.

What is needed is the development of a working-class movement that raises the demand for the expropriation of the ultra-wealthy elite to fund basic social needs, as part of the socialist reorganisation of society.

The SEP supports the demands raised by the WSU and Macquarie rank-and-file committees and the Committee for Public Education:

- halt and reverse the thousands of job cuts and the resulting skyrocketing workloads across the tertiary education sector
- stop the cuts to international student enrolments and defend the right of all students to higher education
- end the victimisation of Randa Abdel-Fattah and other academics who oppose Israel's genocide in Gaza or the bipartisan support for US militarism
- defend genuine academic freedom and the basic democratic right to free speech
- uphold the right to conduct research that is not dictated by the demands of corporate interests, governments and the military
- secure employment for all casualised university workers who want it
- pay increases surpassing the official inflation rate to compensate for past losses
- free first-class education for all students instead of channelling billions of dollars into preparations for US-led wars

We urge all educators and students to get involved in our election campaign to take forward this fight.

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