

Australia: NTEU promotes Labor at University of Sydney strike amid assault on higher education

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26 October 2026

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) invited a member of the New South Wales (NSW) Labor government to address striking University of Sydney (USyd) workers last Thursday, providing a platform for the party that is spearheading the attack on public higher education.

Sarah Kaine, who sits in the NSW Legislative Council, delivered the final speech at a rally of around 400 university staff, students and supporters. Her appearance underscored the NTEU bureaucracy's alignment with Labor, not only at USyd but nationally, as the federal Albanese government oversees the destruction of thousands of university jobs and the corporate restructuring of higher education.

The stoppage reflected growing anger among university workers over declining real wages, mounting workloads, job insecurity and the destruction of public education.

It was the second one-day strike organised by the NTEU at this university in the latest enterprise bargaining dispute. The action was limited, with small morning pickets dismantled before the lunchtime rally and no further stoppages announced.

The NTEU is nominally demanding a 20 percent wage increase over three years, compared with management's offer of 11.52 percent. This claim, capped at 20 percent by the NTEU national executive, falls far short of compensating workers for years of real wage cuts.

The NTEU's claims on workloads, job security and artificial intelligence are window-dressing, committing the union to nothing. On AI, the union seeks consultation and joint review procedures, giving officials a role in overseeing its introduction alongside management, rather than opposing its use to eliminate jobs and intensify workloads.

The NTEU confines workers to separate enterprise bargaining campaigns at individual universities. Nearly 4,000 university jobs have been eliminated nationally over the past two years, while courses have been axed, especially in humanities, and workloads intensified. The union has responded with isolated stoppages and protracted negotiations, opposing a unified struggle against the Albanese government's sector-wide offensive.

At the USyd rally, NTEU NSW division secretary Vince Caughley made a passing reference to federal Labor's underfunding of universities, while directing his denunciations principally against corporate university management.

Yet even as he condemned university executives, Caughley appealed for closer collaboration with them. "We have 100s of experts who could help them. And they need to invite us to help them, because the stakes are so high," he declared.

His remarks exposed the NTEU's aim of securing a greater role in administering the restructuring it claims to oppose.

Kaine, a former NSW division president of the NTEU, chairs a parliamentary inquiry into university governance initiated following a petition campaign organised by the union.

She boasted of "protesting in Parliament, through our committees, and our rude questions to vice chancellors." Her proposed solution was to give students and staff "a much bigger voice on university governing bodies."

This was a political fraud. Kaine presented individual university executives as responsible for the crisis, while the NTEU promoted her as a defender of university workers.

Kaine's parliamentary inquiry focuses on university governance and the conduct of vice-chancellors. This dovetails with the NTEU's campus-by-campus bargaining campaigns, which isolate workers in disputes with individual managements, diverting attention away from the government directing the restructuring.

Kaine also represents the NSW Labor government headed by Premier Chris Minns, which is imposing austerity across public services and attacking democratic rights.

Successive federal Labor and Coalition governments have subordinated universities to big business, forcing institutions to depend increasingly on corporate revenue and exorbitant international student fees.

The Albanese government has accelerated this process. Its 2026 budget cut \$230 million from university research and more than \$600 million from Higher Education Support. Labor has also retained the Coalition's Job-ready Graduates scheme, which has pushed the cost of three-year arts and humanities degrees above \$50,000 while depriving universities of approximately \$1 billion annually in teaching funding.

This is line with the Albanese government's 2024 Universities Accord. It provides a blueprint for further restructuring, tying higher education to the requirements of big business and Australia's military build-up, including the AUKUS pact and preparations for war against China.

The NTEU has embraced this nationalist and militarist

framework. Its recent report on university funding declared that “national security depends on domestic breakthroughs in cybersecurity, geopolitics, advanced manufacturing and defence technology” and demanded that universities serve Australia’s “sovereign and strategic capacity.”

The attack on higher education is part of Labor’s broader austerity offensive. The Albanese government has outlined \$63.8 billion in cuts over four years, including around \$38 billion from the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), threatening essential support for hundreds of thousands of people with disabilities.

At the same time, federal Labor is pouring around \$60 billion annually into the military, with expenditure set to rise further as Australia is integrated into US-led preparations for war against China.

Speakers at the rally invoked opposition to the repression of protests against Israel’s genocide in Gaza. Yet the NTEU gave the final word to Kaine, representing the party whose NSW government has spearheaded police crackdowns on anti-genocide demonstrations and imposed sweeping restrictions on the right to protest.

The pseudo-left Solidarity organisation has long held leadership positions in the USyd NTEU branch. Nick Riemer, the current NTEU branch academic vice-president, is aligned with Solidarity.

Solidarity and Socialist Alternative’s NTEU Fightback claim to represent more militant, rank-and-file alternatives to the national NTEU leadership. This is a fraud. The USyd branch pursues the same course as the bureaucracy nationally: isolated bargaining disputes and collaboration with management. Its promotion of Kaine made its subordination to Labor explicit.

The NTEU also invited federal Greens spokesperson Mehreen Faruqi to address the rally. She denounced the “corporate neoliberal university” and Labor’s refusal to increase funding.

While Faruqi criticised aspects of Labor’s policies, the Greens have repeatedly sought closer parliamentary collaboration with Labor. Both the Greens and the pseudo-left help sustain the NTEU apparatus and, through it, the political subordination of university workers to Labor.

The NTEU’s record demonstrates the consequences.

At Western Sydney University, the NTEU and other unions pushed through agreements providing nominal annual wage increases of just 3.5 percent, while accepting increased workloads and restructuring. The unions had previously agreed to the university’s “Western Reset,” which eliminated nearly 200 jobs and displaced around 600 professional staff.

The agreements provide for closer union-management collaboration in implementing organisational change, exposing the NTEU’s role as an industrial police force for university management.

At the University of Newcastle, the unions backed a four-year agreement imposing further real wage cuts and allowing increased workloads and job destruction, following three limited strikes and 15 months of negotiations.

These betrayals warn of another sellout at USyd, with enterprise agreements also restricting industrial action for years under Australia’s anti-strike industrial relations laws.

A mathematics teacher interviewed by the *Site* at a picket line said: “I think that we are here today to fight for a better vision in education. There is the problem of a pay rise, for sure, but the central question is what we see in the future of education.”

She criticised the subordination of universities to profit-making, the erosion of academic independence and the threat posed by AI. Having recently arrived from Europe, she expressed surprise at Australia’s restrictive industrial relations laws and the obstacles to coordinated action across universities.

Asked whether she would support united action by academic and professional staff across the sector, she replied: “I would definitely support that... I don’t have a solution of how to do it, though.”

Such a struggle requires a complete break with the NTEU apparatus, which functions as an industrial police force for university managements and Labor governments.

Academic and professional staff, casual workers and students must establish democratically controlled rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions, Labor and the Greens, to organise a unified struggle across universities.

These committees must unite with school teachers, health workers and other sections of the working class against austerity, for decent wages, secure jobs and free, high-quality public education as a fundamental social right.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators’ rank-and-file network initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, is fighting to build such committees and unite educators with workers in Australia and internationally against austerity, attacks on democratic rights and the diversion of billions into militarism and war.

University workers and students are urged to contact the CFPE to discuss this perspective and the formation of rank-and-file committees.

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)

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