

# Australian “assembly” of university workers seeks to head off rebellion against NTEU

By our correspondents  
2 September 2020

An amalgam of pseudo-left groups convened an online “national assembly” of tertiary education workers last week amid an intensifying assault on jobs and conditions throughout Australian public universities.

The event was an attempt to divert the growing disgust among university workers with the role of the sector’s trade unions in volunteering unprecedented sacrifices, including large pay cuts, back into the arms of the very same unions.

The meeting was called by the “National Higher Education Action Network,” which describes itself as “a group of rank and file NTEU [National Tertiary Education Union] members.”

The fact that 460 people joined the event was a measure of the shock and outrage triggered by the depth of the offensive against educators and students, and the rush by the NTEU, which primarily covers academics, to offer concessions to the employers.

In line with the demands of the federal Liberal-National government and the corporate elite, university managements are exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic to eliminate 30,000 jobs by next year, accelerating pro-business restructuring programs. Thousands of fixed-term and casual jobs are being destroyed also, and workloads increased for remaining staff.

But those looking for a way forward against this offensive, and the betrayal of the NTEU, would have been sorely disappointed. From the outset, the organisers were solely preoccupied with propping up the NTEU and preventing a break out of its industrial and political straitjacket.

The organisers put to the event a resolution that did not even mention, let alone oppose, the fact that the NTEU is continuing to push through deals with the employers at individual universities to extract cuts to pay and conditions from its members, supposedly in return for meaningless promises to inflict fewer job losses.

In order to protect the NTEU, the resolution was deliberately silent on the fact that the union has stepped up its cooperation with managements after widespread hostility among university workers forced the union to abandon its proposed “national framework” that offered pay cuts of up to 15 percent, and still accepted the destruction of at least 18,000 jobs.

Far from denouncing the NTEU, the organisers’ resolution called for a partnership with the union. It proposed a protest demonstration “involving the NTEU” in October before the government’s budget and called on the NTEU to support “rank-and-file actions.”

Despite their claims to be “democratic,” the organisers refused

to put to the meeting an opposed resolution moved by Socialist Equality Party supporters. Before the event, the organisers had rejected the SEP motion as an amendment to their proposed resolution, saying it advanced a different political strategy—which it certainly did.

The barred resolution began by rejecting the NTEU’s collaboration with the employers. It called for the formation of genuine rank-and-file committees to fight the union-enforced cuts. It proposed that the assembly:

? Opposes all the NTEU’s efforts, via national or local agreements, to make university workers and students pay for the billions of dollars cut from funding by Coalition and Labor-Greens governments over the past decade, and the role of capitalist governments in worsening the global COVID-19 pandemic by their profit-driven responses.

? Demands that, instead of big business being bailed out with billions of dollars, and billions more being handed to the military, resources be poured into healthcare and education funding, to protect the population from COVID-19 and guarantee the basic social right to free, first-class education for all students, including international students, and full-time jobs for all university workers.

? Urges the formation of rank-and-file action committees of tertiary education workers and students—totally independent of the NTEU, governments and employers. These are essential to (1) organise a nationwide, unified struggle, including a general strike, for secure well-paid jobs and basic rights, (2) protect university staff from unsafe COVID-19 conditions and (3) link up with school teachers and other workers nationally and internationally who are facing similar critical struggles against the impact of the worsening global crisis.

? Supports an alternative, socialist perspective, based on the complete reorganisation of society in the interests of all, instead of the financial elite.

With all participants restricted to just two minutes (apart from four opening reports), Michael Head from Western Sydney University briefly outlined the necessity for this opposed line of struggle. He pointed out that the organisers’ resolution did not

even refer to the global pandemic, which has been worsened by the profit-driven responses of every capitalist government.

“Nor does it mention the role of successive governments, both Liberal-National and Labor-Greens, in slashing billions of dollars from universities,” Head said. “Instead, the motion seeks to divert us back into the arms of the NTEU, which has been the police force of the government-employer assault.”

Head indicted the NTEU for “working hand in glove” with managements to enforce cuts. “In one of the latest examples, at Macquarie University, where up to 1,000 jobs are threatened, the NTEU has appealed to the vice chancellor to negotiate with the union on ‘proportional savings measures.’”

Carolyn Kennett from Macquarie University also spoke in favour of the counter-resolution. She said the NTEU was offering the Macquarie management concessions modelled on the union’s earlier “national framework,” which outraged members had forced the union to withdraw.

Kennett said the NTEU’s role was “antithetical” to the fight to defend jobs and conditions. Like other unions, it had prosecuted the attack on workers for years, through “enterprise bargaining” agreements with the employers.

Kennett emphasised the counter-motion’s demand for the redirection of the billions being spent on preparing the military for war. She spoke of the necessity for high quality free public education for all—not just for domestic students but also international students. She urged participants to contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), established by the SEP.

By contrast, the organisers’ resolution embraced the underlying agenda of the corporate elite. It called for the redirection of only “unnecessary” military spending, as if some were necessary. It proposed “accessible” education for students, not free education and the cancellation of all fee debts. Likewise, it did not demand an end to casualisation, just a meaningless “radical” reduction.

These formulations are not accidental. The pseudo-left groups involved—including Socialist Alternative, Socialist Alliance and Solidarity—aspire to join the leadership of the union themselves. They are following in the footsteps of earlier members of their groups, such as NTEU national president Alison Barnes and New South Wales state secretary Michael Thomson, who are today in the forefront of enforcing cuts to jobs and conditions.

The event’s theme was spelled out by one of the opening speakers, Annette Herrera from Melbourne University. She urged the participants to “build union power one workplace at a time.” Roz Ward, from the pseudo-left “NTEU Fightback” group, said: “We have to build around workplace issues.”

Speakers identified themselves as “proud” union members and urged participants to recruit new NTEU members to try to boost its membership of about 30,000 in a workforce of more than 150,000. Seconding the organisers’ resolution, Paddy Gibson from University Technology Sydney said the objective was to “push the union as far as it will go.”

Another feature of the event was its support for efforts to install yet another Greens-backed Labor government. While criticising the present Liberal-National government, not a single one of these speakers referred to the role of previous Labor governments—those of Hawke and Keating and Rudd and Gillard—in partnering with

the trade unions to suppress workers’ struggles and slash billions of dollars from university funding.

The organisers’ resolution proposed a vague campaign of “coordinated actions with the goal of making democratically planned, unprotected industrial action possible so as to defend universities from funding cuts.” Far from a challenge to the outlawing of industrial action since the 1980s by the Labor-union accords and enterprise bargaining regime, this amounts to an indefinite delay to any industrial action.

That is in keeping with the NTEU’s vehement hostility—reiterated at every union meeting—to any industrial action that would break out of this union-backed straitjacket.

To fight the deepening attack on public education, the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) have jointly called for the formation of independent rank-and-file committees of university workers and students to prosecute a genuine industrial and political struggle against all the union-enforced attacks.

That requires challenging the capitalist profit system and turning to a socialist perspective based on the total reorganisation of society in the interests of all, instead of the financial oligarchy. We urge university workers and students to contact us.

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CFPE Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation/>

Twitter account: @CFPE\_Australia

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