

Response to Lucy Nicolls' "Statement of Disendorsement: Rank and File Action (RAFA)"

We were shocked and disappointed to read of Lucy's sudden departure from Rank and File Action (RAFA). We disagree with the criticisms Lucy raises of unnamed RAFA members, and of RAFA itself. Lucy's accusations are surprising given her vocal enthusiasm for the project in our previous meeting only four days before nominations were due, and her stated support for the candidacy of Finola Laughren as the Casual Representative on Branch Committee (a position we learn Lucy is now contesting).

RAFA aims to build a comradely, militant and strong union at USYD. We welcome political debate and contestation, however this needs to be conducted in a way that builds understanding, cohesion and power in the union. We are very concerned by Lucy's accusations that the "moral principles" of RAFA members are wanting or that the USYD NTEU branch operates like a "dictatorship".

Lucy's allegations that our President, Nick Riemer, and current Casuals Representative and bargaining team member Dani Cotton have conspired to undermine strikes and sell out casuals are baseless. Anyone familiar with our branch can see these are false.

Key disagreements:

1. Striking

RAFA members have been ardent builders and supporters of strike action. We have put all our energies into building and promoting the strikes in recent months. This has included recruiting reluctant colleagues to the actions, spending several weeks leafleting the campus entrances beforehand, holding coordinating and police liaison roles at several pickets (where dozens of cars and hundreds of people were turned away on each strike day), and being front and centre in convincing our colleagues, students and community members of the legitimacy of our campaign and the tactical importance of shutting the university down. We think strikes are the most effective form of industrial action and we are committed to building strong and successful strikes.

With regard to the erroneous claim that RAFA members oppose strike action at the beginning of Semester 2, to be clear, we do not nor have not opposed taking such strike action. Rather, the debate between RAFA and Fightback members is a small tactical disagreement about building a strong strike in the first few weeks of semester. RAFA activists want to follow the successful formula the branch adopted in Semester 1 by building a strong mass meeting in week 1 in order to involve the widest possible layers of staff for a strike in week 3, rather than relying on what will likely be a small members meeting during school holidays to immediately call a week 3 strike.

As for the other assertions that Lucy raises, RAFA members did not move to weaken picket protocols in Semester 1, but argued for, and facilitated, strong pickets that aimed to turn everyone away. Indeed, several of us were Picket Captains!

To complement strike actions, we support taking other forms of industrial action, such as flat-rate marking or admin bans. Broadening our tools of industrial action does not mean opposing strike action.

2. De-casualisation and conversion

RAFA members believe casual rights should be central to our campaign, and we are proud to be running the largest number of casual staff on our ticket for the union elections. We are fighting for the de-casualisation of the university through conversion rights, job creation, and improved casual conditions.

Lucy claims that the union conspired to fight for PhD fellowships instead of fighting for long-term casuals. This is demonstrably untrue. A key demand of negotiations remains to fight for a massive University

investment in good quality academic jobs with paid research allocations, 25% of which will be earmarked for long-term USYD casuals. In addition to this genuine pathway of conversion, we need to put an end to the exploitation of those on casual contracts by ensuring casuals are paid for all the hours they work and are afforded the same leave entitlements as other staff. PhD fellowships are intended as a way to give PhD students job security, but they are a small part of the fight against casualisation.

Lucy is mistaken when she claims the branch has attempted to conceal bargaining positions and mislead members. She argues that a pdf attachment was “hidden” and that an email reminder subject was written poorly. In fact, communications have been completely transparent and open. There quite simply has been no “intention to silence debate and opposition”.

3. Jobs Protection Framework (JPF)

RAFA members vigorously opposed the JPF, which was a union-management accord that sought to trade pay cuts for vague promises to end job losses. RAFA members organised a national network of members fighting the JPF, the National Higher Education Action Network (NHEAN), which held a national assembly of 460 NTEU members organising against the JPF and arguing for unprotected strike action instead. We therefore reject Lucy's claim that Fightback was the only opposition to the JPF.

4. Wages: We're calling for CPI +2.5%

Lucy implies that Fightback are the only committee members arguing for a real pay rise of CPI +2.5%. This is another falsehood. RAFA members Dani Cotton and Nick Riemer have been arguing for this since high inflation figures were announced.

5. Ethical and union principles

We believe in union democracy and transparency, and are committed to ensuring members drive NTEU decision making. Our goal is a more inclusive, democratic and fair university. This means ensuring we have a participatory, democratic and activist branch, and using our collective power as workers to defend and extend our rights at USyd. We want real change and know that a united left is needed for this end. This is why we call on Fightback to work with us in a comradely way. Our enemy is management, not each other.

University of Sydney NTEU Rank and File Action (RAFA)
www.rafausyd.wordpress.com