

H2Av2 – NTEU Support of Rights of People of Diverse Sexualities, Sex Characteristics and Gender Identities

Mover of the amendment

This amendment seeks to do two things. First, it calls for an education and research-based action plan against transphobia, in order to action our policy positions and take active steps towards workplaces free from discrimination.

Second, it removes the singling out of gender critical ideology for condemnation, which I understand to be the key element its movers seek to establish in proposing this motion. I want to acknowledge that the movers of the motion in good faith have sought to accommodate concerns around this behind the scenes as reflected in their most recent version of the motion, but unfortunately the motion still singles out and defines gender critical ideology itself as transphobic and intrinsically inconsistent with academic freedom.

So, I still stand to propose the amendment tabled – for the following reasons.

It is not the role of the Union to police ideology. In considering this amendment, you might be tempted to draw comparisons with the union's position in relation to other struggles. But this is not an academic debate about which we can easily analogise. For instance, there are mostly now bright lines in academic circles over what constitutes racism, the causes of climate change and the oppression of the Palestinian people, in a way that bright lines are not established in the academic gender wars.

But even in these other academic areas, if you do want to analogise, we have nonetheless (and rightly) supported members who have promoted unpopular (and some might say damaging or harmful) views. Peter Ridd is one example, whose scientific research claimed the degradation of the Great Barrier Reef was not acute, and Tim Anderson, who superimposed a swastika over an Israeli flag, is another. We defended both members against misconduct termination proceedings, on the important grounds of expression of academic freedom. In relation to these areas, notably, our policy does not take a view on their areas of academic research or condemn their respective related ideologies, in a similar way to the motion you are being asked to support today. If we had policies like the one you are being asked to support today in relation to those members' respective related ideologies, we simply would not have been able to support those members.

In this case, however, we are being asked to pick a side of an academic area about which few of us here are expert, in a way we never have before, except in last year's similar debate. But if we do pick a side, even with the most recent version of the motion, the logical consequence is that our policy position will be weaponised against members and potential members on the "wrong side" of the debate. We have seen this in the UK, where Kathleen Stock found her position untenable after the Universities and Colleges Union, our equivalent, passed a similar motion to the one you are being asked to support today.

The consequence of passing this motion unamended is that our policy could be used to support arbitrary disciplinary action against "gender critical" theorists. It could be used to support moves to sack such staff. In fact, we will no doubt be asked – as the union – to support the sacking of gender critical theorists and supporters, because our policy will say that doing that kind of research is itself bigotry.

But this oversteps in two important ways.

First, we should never police what people think. And here, an important distinction needs to be drawn between ideology and praxis. Whilst we must stand absolutely immovable against transphobic praxis and behaviours of every kind, as the Union, we should never determine what ideology is acceptable and what is not. That is about what people think, and about what our members and potential members research. And that important role falls to our members. That is up to the academy to adjudicate, based on ethical and robust research and debate. It's simply not the union's role.

Second, as a Union we should never seeking for staff to be sacked. Our role is to build a mass movement that struggles together to transgress and ultimately overthrow existing power relations between the boss and the worker. That is our collective struggle. And to win this struggle we need all workers in our tent. Including the ones we disagree with. Because our mission as a union is to achieve improvements in the material conditions of our members. It is not to be an ideologically pure sectarian lobby group.

Finally, freedom of speech and academic freedom is only important when it's difficult. In this case it is very difficult. But nonetheless we must stand for it, and that means allowing academic debate to flourish, no matter how strongly we might disagree with its conclusions.

I ask you to support the amendment.