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UWU boss Tim Kennedy accused of 'misleading' members about links to slush fund

Exclusive by chief digital political correspondent [Clare Armstrong](#)

Unions

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Tim Kennedy has suffered a vote of no confidence in his leadership. (*Supplied: United Workers Union*)

In short:

United Workers Union national secretary Tim Kennedy is accused of "misleading" members about his links to election slush fund IR21.

Senior officials claim the union is owed \$850,000 after an internal investigation found members' time and resources were used to organise multiple fundraising events.

What's next?

The UWU members council is seeking money from IR21 and calling for greater transparency from Mr Kennedy amid revelations union

officials targeted bosses to attend the controversial fundraisers.

The head of one of Australia's most powerful unions has suffered a vote of no confidence amid claims he was aware of allegedly improper use of members' resources to raise money from bosses for an election slush fund.

A dramatic showdown has erupted inside the United Workers Union (UWU) after an internal investigation revealed national secretary Tim Kennedy's ongoing involvement with controversial fundraising company IR21 Ltd, which officials claim owes members \$850,000.

The UWU represents more than 150,000 workers across dozens of industries including early childhood education, aged care, hospitality and manufacturing, and is one of the Australian Labor Party's most influential organisational backers.

Mr Kennedy, who led the now-defunct National Union of Workers (NUW) from 2014 until its 2019 merger with United Voice to form the UWU, has been accused of "misleading" members about the extent of his links to IR21.

He has denied any wrongdoing.

At the same time, the UWU is pursuing IR21 for money it alleges the company owes the union as reimbursement of members' time and resources used for fundraising events held until "at least" 2016.

The company ran annual education seminars that cost \$500 per person, raising funds to support the internal re-election of the NUW leadership and select ALP candidates in state and federal elections.

Emails show Victorian NUW officials were allocated employers to invite and in at least one case a delegate explicitly linked attendance with the "level of cooperation and assistance" a company could expect from the union in the future.

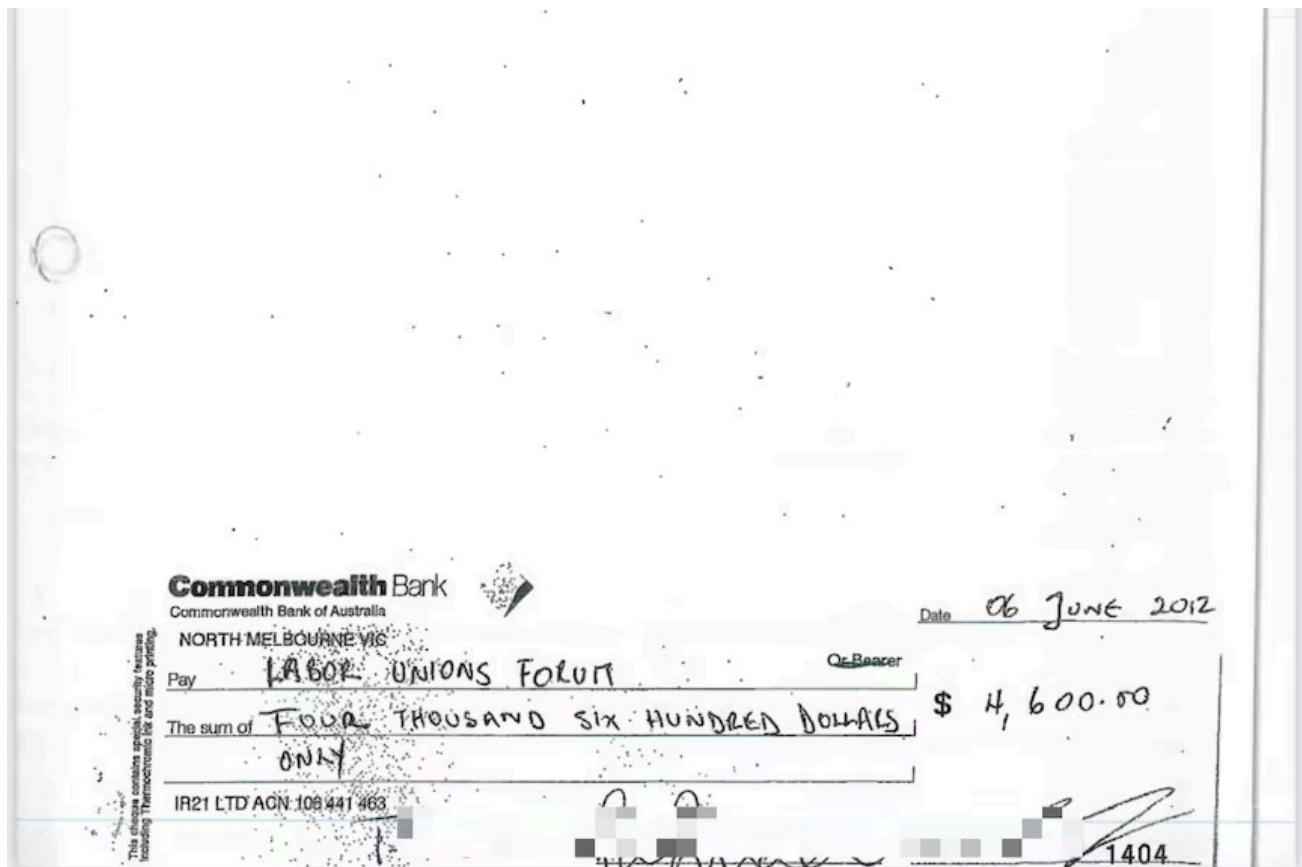
The internal investigation also found NUW funds were used to purchase tickets, a practice the Royal Commission into Trade Union Governance and Corruption previously raised concerns about in a 2014 interim report.

IR21 no longer holds events, but remains operational, having submitted its most recent audited financial report last year.

Mr Kennedy initially downplayed his association with the fundraising vehicle, but the UWU investigation found he has been a bank signatory for the company since 2014.

The ABC has also uncovered multiple cheques from IR21 that appear to have Mr Kennedy's signature dating back to at least 2012.

When confronted by member councillors about the use of union funds for IR21 events and collecting money from bosses, he said while there may be "different views" about "whether morally it should have happened, it was legally sound".



An IR21 cheque from 2012 appears to have Tim Kennedy's signature. (Supplied: Royal Commission into Trade Union Governance and Corruption)

The internal dispute over IR21 activity during Mr Kennedy's tenure has escalated ahead of next year's union elections, which are expected to be fiercely contested.

UWU national president Jo Schofield said in a statement the vote of no confidence and pursuit of IR21 funds were "internal governance matters and while historical, the national executive is working through these".

"United Workers Union does not wish to comment further on the specifics of any confidential internal matter," she said.

"Councillors and the executive remain focused on delivering real change for our members."

No-confidence motion against Kennedy

After being briefed on the investigation, the UWU's 52-person member council censured Mr Kennedy with a vote of no confidence at a meeting on August 20, according to minutes seen by the ABC.

During the meeting Mr Kennedy argued he was not a member of IR21, which he said had been "dormant" since 2019 and insisted to his recollection the union had been "reimbursed" for funds.

But evidence was presented showing that as recently as September 2024, Mr Kennedy had been included in emails related to advice around the resignation of a company director and possible replacements.

Mr Kennedy told the meetings it was "usual" as national secretary he be consulted on IR21 directorships and argued there was no evidence his signature was ever used on the company's bank accounts except "perhaps to reimburse the union".

Unsatisfied with these responses, member councillor Adrian Hinds moved the no-confidence motion, telling fellow union officials he believed Mr Kennedy had been "misleading".

"Members' money has to be spent ethically and responsibly," he said.

"This means not inviting our employers to sit with us at dinners and not accepting that union dollars are spent to elect officials."

At the same meeting, a motion was also passed authorising union directors Gary Bullock and Mel Gatfield to take steps to recover an estimated \$850,000 owed to union members.

"This amount is to compensate UWU for the inappropriate use of UWU staff time performing roles for IR21, for amounts paid to IR21 from union funds and for the inappropriate use of the intellectual property such as the name and the reputation of the union," the motion said.

UWU requests \$850,000 'owed' by IR21

Mr Bullock had first identified what he believed was monies owed to the union by IR21 during budget repair work he began as the UWU's director of administration and finance two years ago.

In November 2023 Hall Payne Lawyers, acting for Mr Bullock on behalf of the union's national executive, sent a legal notice to the company about assets they believed belonged to the UWU.

The lawyers argued IR21 had not reimbursed the union for the "considerable resources expended" organising events that had raised the company an average income of between \$200,000 and \$350,000 each year.

"Our client considers that IR21 holds its assets on trust for the United Workers Union," the letter said.

The lawyers invited IR21 to "wind-up" and "transfer its assets" to the union.



United Workers Union director of finance Gary Bullock conducted the internal investigation that found IR21 owes the union \$850,000. (AAP: Dan Peled)

But in an email to the UWU national executive in January 2024, Mr Bullock advised IR21 had declined this request and sought authorisation to investigate further and ultimately commence "appropriate proceedings" to recover the funds.

The union's member council then requested an update on Mr Bullock's investigation, meeting in August to discuss the matter with Mr Kennedy present to provide answers to questions.

A summary report of the investigation, seen by the ABC, outlines how NUW officials were sent to invite employers in Victoria to IR21 fundraisers, including during Mr Kennedy's earlier tenure as the leader of state branch and then as national secretary.

It found signatories on the bank accounts of the company from 2014 included Mr Kennedy as well as then-fellow NUW officials Paul Richardson and Charles Donnelly.

The report described the "main purpose" of IR21 as the "re-election of NUW leadership".

It found the company held \$851,478 in assets as of June 30, 2023, and noted IR21 had spent \$8,807 in donations in 2022-23.

Past royal commission questioned IR21

IR21 was identified during the Royal Commission into Trade Union Governance and Corruption as a fundraising vehicle for the re-election of NUW officials.

The commissioners said the educational seminars run by IR21 were "in truth understood and marketed as 'NUW events,'" however "revenue from the events was diverted to IR21".

They also noted the IR21 seminars were "generously supported" by the NUW, and the commissioners put to the company's then-director, Mr Donnelly, the practical effect of this was that the NUW was "essentially giving union money to IR21".

The interim report noted Mr Donnelly rejected this characterisation and insisted the NUW had "no practice of funnelling money into IR21", however the commissioners said: "This evidence cannot be accepted."

Union officials asked to invite bosses to IR21 fundraisers

In an email sent by a NUW Victorian official in September 2015, union representatives are advised of a list of companies in their areas who had previously been invited to IR21 events.

"Can you please make sure the following companies are invited to IR21 asap," the official said.

Several companies on the list had Mr Kennedy's name alongside them as the union person to contact those employers.

The use of NUW representatives to solicit funds from employers has angered the current UWU members council and was a key factor in Mr Kennedy's no-confidence vote.



United Workers Union national secretary Tim Kennedy denied wrongdoing when confronted by member councillors about his links to IR21. (ABC News)

Employers' support for fundraiser linked to future 'cooperation' from union

A later exchange between NUW delegates and Victorian-based plastics manufacturer Qenos explicitly linked attendance at IR21 events to supporting the leaders of the union.

In an email sent on November 1, 2016, NUW industrial officer Dario Mujkic told Qenos operations manager Duncan Laslett that that year's event was a "fundraiser for the existing NUW leadership".

He emphasised the "stable, professional and progressive" nature of the union under those leaders.

On November 10, Mr Laslett advised Qenos would not be able to attend due to budget constraints on discretionary spending.

That same day, a Qenos NUW delegate sent an email to Mr Mujkic explaining he had told a representative of the plastics company their decision not to attend the event was "extremely disappointing".

"I will see Duncan tomorrow and intend to let him know this decision will affect the level of cooperation and assistance the company will receive from the delegates in the future," the delegate said.

"The NUW delegates are very pissed off with their decision."

On November 15, a representative for Qenos emailed Mr Mujkic to advise the business had changed its mind and purchased six tickets to attend the IR21 event.

From: [REDACTED]
Date: 10 November 2016 at 15:46:23 AEDT
To: Dario Mujkic
Cc: [REDACTED]

Subject: Re: IR21 Luncheon

Hi Dario,
I received a call from [REDACTED], the new HR manager who took over from [REDACTED] to discuss the IR luncheon. She informed me that Qenos will not be supporting the luncheon due to budget constraints. I told her it is extremely disappointing she has made this decision. I expect you will be contacted about this from either her or Duncan.

I will see Duncan tomorrow and intend to let him know this decision will affect the level of cooperation and assistance the Company will receive from the delegates in the future.

Sorry mate but I can assure you the NUW delegates are very pissed off with their decision.

Regards,

In a 2016 email a NUW official linked IR21 event attendance to the level of cooperation a company can expect from the union in the future. (Supplied: Royal Commission into Trade Union Governance and Corruption)

Union members' 'frustration' boils over

A UWU member councillor who agreed to speak to the ABC anonymously described the recent August meeting as "really serious" and said the motion of no confidence against Mr Kennedy was "not a foregone conclusion".

"Everybody just wanted to get to the bottom of what had happened," they said.

The member said Mr Kennedy had initially argued he was "just a bystander" and had "nothing to do with" the raising of funds from employers and use of union resources for IR21 fundraising events.

"It was only when emails were found, and there was really clear evidence in front of him that he would inch forward and tell us a little bit more of the story," they said.

"It just ended up looking like he was ducking and weaving all the time.

The member said over the course of this "digging" a majority of the council "gradually lost confidence in Tim".

"He kept saying, 'It may have been morally questionable, but it was legal,' and I think that added to the member councillors' frustration, because nobody wants a leader ... to be doing the bare minimum legally," they said.

"There were a lot of people in the room that had the same view as me that it was pretty repugnant that money had ever been taken from bosses in the first place."

The member said they wanted "transparency" to get the UWU "back on track".

"We've always been a union ... that prided itself on its good dealings and strong governance, and it kind of broke everybody's heart that we were in this position," they said.

Acknowledging UWU elections were due in 2026, the member said it was "going to be a tense time", but that did not mean the union should "throw away accountability".

Mr Kennedy and Charles Power, who is the current director of IR21, have been contacted for comment but did not respond by deadline.

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