

Australian university refuses to reinstate sacked academic

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The University of Wollongong, south of Sydney, is continuing to refuse to reinstate Associate Professor Ted Steele despite international condemnation and blackbans by academics, as well as widespread anger among university staff and intellectuals throughout Australia.

A meeting of the university's 18-member governing council on June 8 blocked debate on three resolutions criticising Vice Chancellor Gerard Sutton's summary dismissal of Dr Steele on February 26. Instead, it adopted a motion put by Sutton, urging its members to await the outcome of legal proceedings against the university by the academics' union, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU).

Steele's sacking is a direct attack on academic freedom—the right to teach, conduct research, publish and speak, including making criticism of university and government policy, without fear of official or commercial retribution. Sutton dismissed Steele, a tenured academic with 16 years' service in the university's biological sciences department, without notice or any hearing for publicly opposing the growing commercialisation of universities.

Specifically, Steele told a journalist that the grades of two of his honours students were upgraded within the department against his recommendations and those of an external referee. Steele and other academics reported such incidents when asked to respond to a national survey in which many academics complained of management pressure to lift students results and produce commercially favourable research in order to generate corporate sponsorship and student fee revenue. Years of funding cuts by successive federal governments have made universities increasingly dependent on these sources of income.

The survey and Steele's comments received wide publicity in Asia, where Australian universities actively recruit fee-paying students, generating a large share of the \$3.4 billion a year that they earn from overseas students. Sutton dismissed Steele amid strenuous efforts by the Australian Vice Chancellors Committee and federal Education Minister David Kemp to discredit the survey, and

put pressure on academics not to go public with their concerns.

Academics and their unions internationally have denounced Steele's dismissal and demanded his immediate reinstatement. They are boycotting conferences at Wollongong University and blacklisting it as a place of work. University teaching unions from Britain, Canada, the United States, Ireland and New Zealand are among those that have written to the Wollongong Chancellor, Michael Codd, protesting against Sutton's decision.

President of the 30,000-member Canadian Association of University Teachers, Professor Thomas Booth, wrote: "The Vice-Chancellor's actions show contempt for academic freedom, which is the cornerstone of any university. His actions bring the University of Wollongong into disrepute and cast a shadow over the entire Australian university community."

British Association of University Teachers general secretary David Triesman said his union had called on British academics to avoid all dealings with Wollongong University because: "The standards universities must follow have to include an exacting requirement to foster and support academic freedom. This is sometimes tested when criticisms come close to home, but that is a test no university can afford to fail."

The NTEU has reported that it has received some 2,000 messages of support from academics and faculty unions around the world, including in Europe, Asia and South Africa.

University staff members within Australia are also clearly outraged by Steele's victimisation. More than 5,000 have signed a NTEU petition expressing "concern and anger" at Steel's arbitrary dismissal, calling on the Wollongong University council to direct Sutton to ensure that Steele is afforded due process.

Wider criticism has been voiced as well. Nine prominent Australians sent an open letter to the university council stating that the university's actions "are cause for concern for all members of the academic community, and more

broadly among members of the public who care about the integrity and accountability of public universities”. The letter insisted that “academic freedom is a right and responsibility of academic staff” which “entails the right of all staff to freely express opinions about the institutions in which they work”.

Eminent science professors Frank Fenner and Ian Lowe signed the letter, joined by novelists Jean Bedford and Peter Corris, composer Roger Woodward, media commentator Eva Cox, Liberty Victoria president Chris Maxwell, Association for the Public University president Paul James and Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) president Sharan Burrow.

By imposing bans on Wollongong University, demanding Steele’s immediate reinstatement and highlighting the threat to academic freedom, the international protests are in marked contrast to the NTEU’s own campaign. Four months after Steele’s sacking, it has still refused to call any industrial action. The union has not demanded Steele’s reinstatement and instead has sought to divert its members away from the fundamental principle at stake—that of academic freedom.

Rather than defending Steele, the NTEU has sought to defend its enterprise agreement with the university. Far from challenging Steele’s dismissal, the union has simply objected to the fact that Sutton did not follow the procedures set down in the agreement. The union’s campaign centres on taking the university to the Federal Court on July 5, alleging a breach of the agreement.

Clause 59 of the agreement empowers the Vice-Chancellor to dismiss a staff member without notice where “serious misconduct” has occurred. In the NTEU’s summary of the legal issues, posted on its web site, the union states that it does not dispute that power. It merely argues that, under Clause 61 of the agreement, Sutton should have given Steele a hearing before a committee before deciding to sack him.

These clauses, agreed to by the union, have opened the door for Sutton. Moreover, they are among a number of clauses that have become standard in NTEU agreements with universities, giving the managements unprecedented power to undertake disciplinary action and impose retrenchments, as well as introduce short-term contracts and casual teachers, to assist in cost-cutting and restructuring along corporate lines.

At the Wollongong University council meeting, Sutton was able to exploit the NTEU’s stance to gag debate on motions criticising his actions. His resolution not only invoked the union’s lawsuit as a reason to cut off discussion but also addressed the union leadership’s concerns by committing the university to abiding by its enterprise agreements.

NTEU national president Carolyn Allport was quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald* as welcoming that commitment. Her comment underscores the common ground between the NTEU leadership and the university.

Initially, in fact, NTEU officials refused to organise any campaign over Steele’s dismissal, on the pretext that other members of his department did not back him. When staff members at Wollongong and other universities began to voice concerns about the implications of Steele’s case, the union was forced to change tack. It launched a campaign—not in defence of Steele, however, but its industrial agreement.

Significantly, the union campaign has remained silent on the key question raised by Steele and many other academics—the subordination of the universities to market requirements. This is not accidental. For the past decade, under both the present government and the previous Labor government, the union has worked closely with university administrations to enforce budget cuts, particularly in areas of critical inquiry, shut down departments deemed to be unprofitable and restructure universities to meet corporate requirements.

Statistics released by the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee on May 29 show some of the impact of this budget slashing and restructuring. They reveal a continuing deterioration in the ratio of students to teaching staff. Between 1989—when the Labor government launched a major reorganisation of the university system—and 2000 the ratio rose by 40 percent, from 13.50 to 18.84. When the present Howard government came to office in 1996, the ratio stood at 15.68. Four years later it was 20 percent higher, including a 3 percent rise from 1999 to 2000.

These figures mean larger classes, over-crowded facilities and less attention paid to students, not to speak of increased workloads and stress for staff. They reflect an underlying shift in the function of universities from higher education to meeting the needs of business—both in churning out thousands more economics, accounting, management, law and information technology graduates and in re-directing staff resources away from teaching and into conducting commercially-marketable research.

In the face of these trends, Ted Steele’s sacking has become a critical test for the defence of academic freedom and the future of tertiary education itself.



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