Australia: Union lifts work bans at Macquarie University

Our reporters
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At a membership meeting on Wednesday at Sydney's Macquarie University, senior officials of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) helped push through a resolution to end staff bans on exam results that had been imposed two weeks ago. The union's state secretary Genevieve Kelly and the national assistant secretary Matthew McGowan, along with the presidents of the University of Sydney and University of New South Wales (UNSW) NTEU branches were present, revealing a top-level concern to get the bans lifted.

Up to a hundred staff at Macquarie University had been stood down without pay since December 7 for refusing to release end of semester student results. Together with similar indefinite stand-downs of 38 union members at the UNSW, the university's action marked an aggressive drive by tertiary education employers nationally to coerce academics into accepting increasing casualisation and "flexibility" of employment.

The union's role in aborting the industrial action at Macquarie not only leaves the UNSW members on their own. It paves the way for resumed enterprise bargaining negotiations with Macquarie's management, designed to assist the university to impose job cuts and sweeping changes to job security and working conditions in order to meet the requirements of the Gillard government's "education revolution," which includes a radical new pro-market funding scheme for universities.

Despite the presence of the UNSW branch president, Wednesday's union meeting was not informed that fellow academics at that university, which is also in Sydney, had voted the previous day to continue exam result bans. Academics at UNSW are fighting similar management demands, including the unlimited use of casual academics and fixed-term contracts. The union's decision to keep Macquarie academics in the dark about the UNSW vote is a continuation of the NTEU's role in isolating its members at each university, and keeping them straitjacketed within the confines of separate enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs), in the face of an offensive driven by the Labor government.

Academics at Macquarie are opposed to across-the-board cuts of 7 percent to teaching funding allocations. The cuts mean six tenured staff positions will be lost in the Faculty of Science—the first such cuts in decades. Yet the NTEU has not raised a single demand to defend jobs and is blocking a genuine campaign, in unity with the students, against the university's slash-and-burn measures. The essential perspective of the NTEU is to make an accommodation with the cuts, and to oversee their implementation as part of the next EBA.

Since the faculty cuts were announced earlier this month, staff members at Macquarie have faced the almost immediate impact of the Labor government's draconian Fair Work Act industrial laws. Last week the university sought an order from the Fair Work Australia (FWA) tribunal to force staff to release exam results. Under Labor's legislation, the tribunal can order workers to halt industrial action if it is threatening to cause "significant harm" to any part of the economy, or "endangering the safety, health or welfare" of any segment of the population.

As unions have done for decades, the NTEU used the tribunal hearing as a lever to move to terminate the industrial action. The union agreed to a timetable for releasing results for some categories of students, including graduating students and students who had failed some courses. The NTEU admitted at Wednesday's meeting that this had eroded the effectiveness of the bans. In essence, the union had enforced the Labor government's anti-strike legislation.

Despite efforts by the NTEU and other unions to portray Labor's Fair Work Act as fairer than the previous Howard coalition government's Work Choices legislation, academics are being confronted with the

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reality that their basic rights, as well as jobs and working conditions, are under direct threat from the Gillard government.

The NTEU's claims that the results ban was a "highly effective" action are a fraud. There has been no progress on outstanding enterprise bargaining issues or on the cuts in the Faculty of Science, which has been left with a budget shortfall of $2.87 million. All departments in the faculty have been directed to slash their budgets, with five departments targeted for deep cuts and job losses.

As the WSWS warned more than two years ago, when the Labor government first unveiled its new funding mechanism, "small unviable" units and teaching programs—those failing to attract the student enrolments required to survive under a market-driven approach to education—are bearing the brunt of the measures.

Faculty of Science departments have cut their casual teaching allocations to the bone, inevitably resulting in higher workloads for permanent academic staff. The cuts will adversely affect postgraduate students who rely on casual teaching to top up their income due to the inadequacy of postgraduate scholarships. Courses with small enrolments have been "rested," with staff aware that those courses will not be taught in the foreseeable future. Teaching hours in some courses have been reduced. Budgets for conference attendance for staff and postgraduate students have been slashed.

Even after all these cuts, the university management insisted that the only long term solution to the funding crisis was job losses. The university has called for "voluntary redundancies" in three departments: Physics, Computing and Environment and Geography. There is nothing voluntary about the call—academics were told that if there were not enough volunteers then a strict ranking process would be applied. Academics would be assessed by the amount of money they brought into the university by way of research and teaching activity. Community engagement, the university's terminology for industry collaboration in research, would also determine who would be retrenched.

This pro-market approach to retrenchments is a direct response to Labor's insistence that universities meet the needs of business. Cultural and educational considerations play no part. It is no surprise that the Physics department has been told to cut 14 percent of its staff, and from areas that do not engage in industry collaboration.

The NTEU continues to portray the cuts and the intransigence of the university management as the product of an individual vice-chancellor with an ideological agenda. In reality, university managements are simply enforcing the Labor government's agenda. Moreover, the funding shortfalls at Macquarie are part of a wider funding crisis produced by decades of underfunding by successive governments and increasing reliance on overseas student fees. Plummeting international student numbers and Labor's new funding regime are combining to lead to unprecedented attacks on jobs and employment conditions.

Around the world, public education at all levels is under a severe assault in the wake of the global financial crisis, with students and teachers engaged in decisive battles with governments across Europe and America over finding cuts, fee hikes and job losses. Similar attacks are now emerging in Australia. They will only deepen as the international economic situation deteriorates.

The NTEU has politically backed the Labor government, and opposed any unified struggle against its funding "revolution". Instead, the union officials are seeking at all costs to contain the anger of university workers and prevent them from developing a political struggle in defence of public education against the Gillard government. Such a struggle is essential in order to tackle the problem at its root—the profit system— which subordinates every aspect of education, as well as social and cultural life, to the dictates of the market.

As a first step, in order to defeat the Macquarie and UNSW attacks, university workers—both academic and general—must take matters out of the hands of the NTEU and call mass meetings of staff and students to plan an industrial and political campaign against Labor's program. A determined stand by university staff and students would win powerful support throughout the working class, in Australia and internationally.

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