

Staff members stood down at two Australian universities

Our reporters
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Academics and other members of staff have been stood down without pay this week for withholding exam results at two Sydney universities—the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and Macquarie University. Managements at the two universities are aggressively using the Gillard government’s Fair Work industrial laws, which permit such actions.

Both disputes arise directly from the Labor government’s “education revolution”. The universities are demanding unlimited use of casuals, short-term contracts and part-time staff in order to gain the “flexibility” they need to operate in the new market-driven funding regime currently being introduced by the government.

At least 27 people have been stood down at UNSW since October 27, when the staff voted to renew work bans that had been withdrawn in July. At Macquarie, in a highly provocative move, National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) branch president Cathy Rytmeister was stood down on December 1. Some 90 other Macquarie staff members have signalled their intention to withhold results next week.

Macquarie staff endorsed the work bans at a meeting on November 15, after management announced funding cuts of 7 percent for undergraduate teaching—cuts that will mean job losses in the science faculty.

Even though the cuts flow directly from the Gillard government’s free market agenda, the NTEU is keeping its members straitjacketed within the narrow framework of bargaining for new enterprise agreements at UNSW and Macquarie.

Both university managements are adamant that they must retain full discretion to determine levels of non-permanent staff. However, the NTEU is blocking unified action. Instead, it is seeking to divert the anger and hostility expressed by staff members into limited

and isolated bans in order to block a unified political struggle against the Labor government.

The standing down of staff highlights the repressive nature of the government’s industrial relations laws. Under the Fair Work Act, employers can suspend or lockout staff even when industrial action is limited to partial work bans. The provocative decision by Macquarie to stand down the union branch president is an outright attack on basic democratic rights.

In a message to members, however, NTEU national secretary Grahame McCulloch blamed the former Howard government’s Work Choices industrial laws for the standoff in bargaining, obscuring the fact that Labor’s laws have retained and even strengthened the anti-strike provisions. McCulloch said nothing about Labor’s pro-market “education revolution” that is driving declining working conditions at all universities.

Both the draconian provisions of the Fair Work Act and the new funding regime were personally drafted by Julia Gillard—in her former role as education minister—before she was installed as prime minister in the June 24 backroom coup that ousted Kevin Rudd.

Gillard’s program represents an escalation of the processes that began with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments from 1983 to 1996. Universities have been increasingly starved of public funding, and domestic and international students have been forced to pay exorbitant fees. Billions of dollars have been extracted from international students through fees each year, making the international student “market” Australia’s third-highest export earner.

With high percentages of overseas students, UNSW and Macquarie are particularly exposed to the fluctuations of this market, which is now in rapid decline due to the high value of the Australian dollar, intensified competition from universities worldwide,

and growing concerns among international students about racist violence and over-stretched facilities in Australia.

The inevitable consequence of subordinating universities to the dictates of the global capitalist market is ongoing financial volatility, and the consequent destruction of job security. The growing use of casuals and fixed-term contracts has profound implications for security of tenure and academic freedom, which are essential to fight the mounting commercialisation of universities and the tailoring of every aspect of teaching and research to the requirements of business and government.

These processes will only worsen under the demand-driven funding arrangements proposed by Prime Minister Gillard. In what is effectively a voucher system, from 2012 universities will be paid according to the number of students they attract to their courses. Universities will have to compete with each other for funds by enrolling as many students as possible in the most lucrative courses. These will be increasingly tailored to meet the narrow vocational requirements of employers, which can change abruptly.

The NTEU, however, supports Labor's restructuring of tertiary education, which the union has described as a "critical part of the nation building agenda". Furthermore, the NTEU and other unions have all voted for Labor's industrial laws at Australian Council of Trade Union congresses.

On each campus, the NTEU has worked to impose the government's policies by reaching separate agreements with university management. Earlier this year, for example, the NTEU negotiated a deal at the University of Western Sydney that allows for 15 varieties of fixed-term contracts, some as short as six months.

The NTEU, and its pseudo-left apologists in groups such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance—along with the Greens—are working to prevent any political movement directed against the Labor government. Despite Gillard's market-driven policies, they all continue to insist that Labor is a "lesser evil" compared with the Liberals.

To answer the threat posed by the UNSW and Macquarie stand-downs, staff and students need to organise city-wide mass meetings across all university campuses—independent of the NTEU—to discuss and

develop a unified industrial and political campaign against the Labor government's agenda. Such a fight requires a socialist perspective. Universities must be fully-funded public institutions, freely available to all and run in the interests of the full intellectual and cultural development of students and staff. That is only possible on the basis of a socialist economy, whose guiding principle is the satisfaction of human need, rather than the demands of the corporate and financial elite.



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