

Australia: Academics' union prepares sell-out at Macquarie University

Our reporter
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Staff at Sydney's Macquarie University, involved in rolling industrial action for the past six months against budget cuts and a sharp increase in the use of short-term and casual appointments, are facing the imposition of a trade union deal prepared behind their backs.

Members of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) are due to meet today, a fortnight after a March 16 meeting that was supposedly called to inform them about the progress of enterprise bargaining negotiations. The real purpose of that meeting was to prepare them for a sell-out that will enforce the measures demanded by Vice Chancellor Steven Schwartz.

Over the past year, the NTEU has isolated its members at universities across the country, and struck individual enterprise agreements that deliver the "flexibility" of staffing and job conditions required by the Gillard government's so-called education revolution, which consists of a market-driven funding regime.

Just last December, about 150 staff members at Macquarie University and another Sydney institution, the University of New South Wales (UNSW), were stood down without pay for refusing to release exam results. The NTEU, deeply opposed to unifying the two struggles in a political fight against the Labor government, deliberately kept them separated, and misled the staff about the extent of support at both campuses until after the exam bans had been lifted.

Under the Gillard government's blueprint, all undergraduate student places will be deregulated from next year, and what is essentially a voucher system will come into effect. Universities will be funded only for the number of students that they enrol each year. In anticipation of the new regime, universities are already

competing with each other to ramp-up enrolments in high-demand courses, without the necessary increases in full-time staff positions.

At Macquarie, supposedly "low demand" courses face possible extinction. Last November, when the university announced cuts to teaching allocations, the Faculty of Science was hardest hit—a \$2.87 million deficit would be funded through the elimination of permanent academic and research positions. The axe would fall on those staff members who failed a strict ranking based on the number of dollars (by way of research, teaching and industry collaboration) that they brought into the university.

Far from conducting a genuine fight against the proposed cuts, the NTEU diverted the anger of staff to pursue its own enterprise bargaining agenda, enabling the management's basic push to proceed.

At the March 16 meeting the contempt of the NTEU for its members was on full display. Around 150 academics were told that NTEU bargaining representatives had been forced to make a number of undisclosed trade-offs in order to settle some outstanding clauses. Staff were kept entirely in the dark about the number and content of these trade-offs.

NTEU officials ensured the suppression of any genuine discussion or debate. Members could speak only once. NTEU state secretary Genevieve Kelly misleadingly claimed that 32 universities had already signed enterprise agreements providing for better pay and improved job security.

In reality, the agreements struck by the NTEU have given university managements greater scope to use short-term employment contracts, facilitating the anticipated

sharp fluctuations in student numbers under Labor’s new funding model. For example, at the University of Western Sydney, two-year teaching-only positions have been created, along with a new array of short-term contracts.

The NTEU has endorsed agreements that include provisions for the unlimited use of fixed-term contracts. At the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) the agreement states: “Nothing in this Clause shall limit the number or proportion of staff that UTS may employ in a particular type of appointment”.

The NTEU’s “limits on casualisation” consist of clauses that merely pay lip service to the importance of job security and ongoing employment. At the University of Newcastle, for example, the management has agreed to conduct a “review” of casual employment and “consult” on its findings.

Similar concessions are being prepared at Macquarie University. At the March 16 meeting, Socialist Equality Party member Carolyn Kennett spoke from the floor. Kennett said she rejected all four options put to staff at the meeting: 1. Do nothing; 2. Accept management’s offer; 3. Continue limited industrial action; 4. Escalate industrial action.

“I’m in favour of escalating industrial action,” Kennett told the meeting “but not on the basis of enterprise bargaining claims.” She explained that enterprise agreements were being used to enforce Labor’s dictates across the higher education sector and called for a political struggle against the Gillard government’s agenda.

Significantly, her call won support from around one quarter of those in attendance. University workers are drawing conclusions about Labor’s program. In 2007, Labor was elected on the back of an anti-Liberal vote. There were significant illusions—promoted assiduously by the education unions—that Labor would redress the funding crisis gripping the sector. Gillard’s “education revolution” was packaged as a progressive measure aimed at improving the system. Three years later, these illusions are being shattered.

The purpose of the “education revolution” was not to improve education but to usher in policies long championed by big business and right-wing think tanks.

Labor aims to increasingly privatise schools, TAFEs and universities, and subordinate every aspect of education to the productivity and profit requirements of business.

One staff member who objected to conducting a fight against the Gillard government’s policies said that since only 100 or so academics at Macquarie had taken part in recent industrial action, there were too few staff to conduct a political fight. This same objection, which has been raised at previous meetings, ignores the role of leadership and program in determining the political character and effectiveness of any struggle.

The real obstacle to the struggle of university staff—and the entire working class—is the role of the trade unions in enforcing the Labor government’s program. For more than 25 years, the unions have helped successive governments to slash funding and resources for public education.

The March 16 meeting adjourned without a vote being taken on any of the four options. The NTEU is seeking to wear down the opposition among staff and create the conditions for a vote that will ratify a new enterprise agreement that will safeguard the Gillard government’s agenda.

The NTEU’s proposed sell-out deal should be decisively rejected. To wage a struggle against the market-driven attacks on education requires a political break from the trade unions. A rank and file committee should be formed to unify with staff at UNSW and other universities, as well as students, teachers and parents, guided by the fight for an alternative socialist program.



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