

Union seeks to ram through pro-market deal at Australia's Macquarie University

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
27 July 2011

The following statement is being circulated by Socialist Equality Party supporters at Macquarie University in Sydney, where the National Tertiary Education Union is seeking to push through a new enterprise agreement that will further the federal Labor government's "education revolution." Similar agreements have been imposed at individual universities across Australia over the past 18 months, with the union isolating its members at each campus in order to prevent a unified struggle against the introduction of a free market regime that will undercut the conditions of staff and students nationally, as part of a broader assault on public services.

An enterprise agreement ratified by the national executive of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) at Sydney's Macquarie University is part of a major new assault on the conditions of staff and students. Like agreements struck by the NTEU at more than 30 universities nationally so far, its purpose is to facilitate the Gillard Labor government's radical pro-market restructuring of tertiary education.

Over the past 12 months, Macquarie University staff members have participated in repeated industrial action, opposing attacks on working conditions and outright cuts, including threats to sack tenured staff in the Faculty of Science. Academics at University of New South Wales and Wollongong have also struck and imposed bans. Despite provocative stand downs at Macquarie and UNSW, the NTEU worked consciously to isolate each of these struggles and channel this opposition into claims for new enterprise agreements—which will impose the very kinds of measures that staff members have fought against.

Working in partnership with the university management, the NTEU is attempting to impose the Macquarie agreement via a secret postal ballot. Trampling on the democratic rights of its members, the union has suppressed all meaningful debate. At the last union branch meeting, on May 3, the NTEU branch executive opposed a resolution moved by Socialist Equality Party supporter Carolyn Kennett, who demanded that members be given the right to read and discuss the agreement before voting on its content. Instead, the union rammed through an "in principle" vote endorsing the unseen draft document.

Immediately, the union and the university presented the deal publicly as a foregone conclusion. Macquarie management released a statement to all staff, declaring it was "happy to announce" that the university and the NTEU had "successfully completed" negotiations.

A further six weeks of closed-door discussions followed, with the content of the negotiations concealed from staff. On June 17, the union branch executive held a party to celebrate the end of bargaining—more than a month before members had even seen the agreement, let alone voted on it.

It is now clear why the contents have been such a closely guarded secret. They reveal the direct connection between what the union has agreed to, and the new education "market" that is about to be unleashed by the Labor government next year. As from 2012, all regulation of student numbers will cease, leaving universities to compete with each other to attract enrolments in order to survive financially. Some of the key provisions in the agreement include:

* No restrictions on casualisation. Section 3.6.25 of the agreement states that the NTEU and management recognise that "casual employment may legitimately be used by the University to address fluctuations in the academic and business cycle of the University".

* The further erosion of permanency via fixed-term employment, including to cope with a "sudden unanticipated rise in student enrolments". Among the other categories are "teaching focused positions," "convertible level A" (associate lecturer) jobs and "Early Career Fellowships." Young academics, far from being offered career progression, will become a professional underclass, unable to develop a research profile and denied job security.

* The appointment of "teaching scholars" who will have 80 percent of their workloads allocated to teaching, with any academic able to be assigned this role "by mutual agreement".

The "flexible" staffing arrangements and increased casualisation are designed to impose Labor's "education revolution". With block funding for universities replaced by funding for individual students from next year, managements must develop workforces

that can respond rapidly to fluctuating market demands, which will be bound up primarily with the narrow requirements of employers.

For more than three decades—since the Hawke Labor government re-introduced “user-pays” student fees—tertiary education has been chronically under-funded, forcing universities to rely ever-more heavily on commercial sources of income.

Macquarie University already demonstrates the outcome of this perspective. It is heavily reliant on international student fees (some 30 percent of revenue) and has pursued various high-risk private ventures. Since the global financial crisis began in 2008, these income streams have begun to unravel. A private hospital launched by Macquarie with great fanfare made a loss in the 2009-10 financial year of \$27.5 million.

As at other universities, it is staff and students who are being made to foot the bill for this funding crisis through the eradication of job security, the erosion of pay, chronic overcrowding and sharply increasing student to staff ratios. This year, in an effort to offset its financial woes, and position itself to grab a larger market share next year, Macquarie “over-enrolled” by nearly 30 percent—that is, it enrolled many more students than it had been funded to educate.

From the 1980s onward, the NTEU has acted as the chief enabler for the pro-business assault on higher education conducted by successive governments, Labor and Liberal alike. In 2009, when Labor unveiled its new market-based funding formula, the union welcomed the announcement as a “critical part of the nation building agenda.”

Labor’s “nation building agenda” comprises policies long championed by big business, including a virtual voucher system of funding, creating the conditions for a two-tier education system, where the broad mass of students will gain minimal vocational qualifications and a tiny layer will receive a high quality education. As in other parts of the world, education is being increasingly subordinated to the demands of the financial and corporate elites, which demand a flexible and compliant workforce.

Just over 12 months ago Gillard was installed as prime minister in a backroom coup orchestrated by major corporate interests to carry out a new wave of economic restructuring and austerity measures, in line with those being implemented throughout Europe and the United States.

Just days after she was installed, Gillard identified health and education as sectors that were relatively untouched by the Hawke-Keating free-market reforms in the 1980s and 1990s. She signalled further privatisation, declaring that these were “services where competition and value is often held back by jurisdictional red tape and the lack of seamless national markets... The challenge is not whether to combine public and private resources in these essential sectors, but how best to do it.”

Under Gillard’s Fair Work Australia (FWA) laws, staff have just one week to view the 73-page enterprise agreement, with an online secret ballot due to begin this Thursday. An “information meeting” organised by management and the union on Monday was a fraud. Because the agreement was presented as a fait accompli, only two staff members attended while university and union representatives falsely extolled the supposed benefits of the agreement.

At this stage, the great danger is that the enterprise agreement will be imposed by default, either because staff are unaware of its content or because they see no alternative. This would allow Labor’s agenda to proceed unchallenged—not just at Macquarie, but nationally.

In order to oppose this agenda, academics, together with all university staff and students, confront the necessity for a political struggle against the Labor government and its trade union enforcers.

As a first step, the SEP calls for a “no” vote and for the convening of mass meetings—independently of the unions—of all staff and students at Macquarie, and combined meetings across all universities, for a full discussion of the Gillard government’s assault on tertiary education and the development of the broadest possible industrial and political campaign to defeat it.

Against Labor’s and the NTEU’s subordination of education to the dictates of the market, the SEP advocates a socialist perspective that insists on the basic social right of all workers and young people to a free, high-quality education. This struggle must be part of a broader mobilisation to defend the conditions of the working class as a whole, which means taking up the fight for a workers’ government that will completely re-organise society along socialist lines.

We urge academics and students who agree with this perspective to help distribute this statement to colleagues, contact the SEP and make plans to attend its forthcoming conferences, “The failure of capitalism and the fight for socialism today.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact