

Australian university announces 70 redundancies

Our correspondents
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Just one day after a new enterprise agreement was pushed through by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) at Sydney's Macquarie University last week, the management announced redundancies. No sooner had the university's academic staff members voted in an online ballot on the three-year agreement, than the management declared it was seeking 70 "voluntary separations"—3 percent of the workforce—and other unspecified cuts to staffing levels to achieve further "salary savings".

The timing of the job cuts underlines the direct connection between the enterprise agreements that the NTEU has helped impose on staff at individual universities across Australia during the past 18 months, and the Gillard government's "education revolution"—which is turning the entire university sector into a market-driven system.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members and supporters at Macquarie had campaigned for a "No" vote on the agreement, warning it was part of a major assault on the conditions of staff and students throughout higher education. This warning has been completely confirmed.

In a statement released to staff last Tuesday, Macquarie's human resources director Tim Sprague blamed the job cuts on the fact that the "entire Australian higher education sector is facing a decline in international student enrolments." There had to be a "necessary readjustment in line with what is happening in the current international market," despite the university diversifying its "income streams" via various high-risk commercial projects.

With its heavy dependence on fees from overseas students (some 30 percent of revenue), Macquarie University has become one of the sharpest expressions of the transformation of universities into little more than business entities at the mercy of market forces. Successive Labor and Liberal governments have slashed funding to public education, embraced privatisation and introduced ever-higher domestic and international student fees.

Under the Gillard government's new funding plan, due to take full effect in 2012, the financial crisis will only deepen. Instead of receiving block government grants, universities

will be paid according to the number of students actually enrolled each year. Enrolments will constantly fluctuate as universities compete to attract students to the most popular or potentially lucrative courses, predominantly determined by the requirements of business.

Universities are using the new agreements struck with the NTEU to create "flexible workforces" with higher rates of casualisation and new categories of short-term contract employment. As at Macquarie, this includes "teaching weighted positions" that allocate 80 percent of workloads to teaching, creating an underclass of junior academics.

Job cuts, including forced retrenchments, began last year when Melbourne's Monash University announced 300 redundancies. The University of Ballarat has had two rounds of redundancies in the past 15 months. Science faculties at the University of Western Australia, Monash University and Macquarie University have each been threatened with forced redundancies.

By splitting and isolating staff at individual universities, and blocking any unified struggle, the NTEU has provided a green light for this wave of job cuts. At Macquarie, the union diverted opposition to staff cuts announced last November at the Faculty of Science into the enterprise bargaining process. At the same time, any genuine discussion over the contents of the new agreement was suppressed.

On May 3, the NTEU pushed through an "in principle" vote endorsing what was then an unseen draft agreement, opposing a motion moved by maths lecturer and SEP supporter Carolyn Kennett which demanded that members be given the right to read and discuss the agreement before voting on its content. Late last month, the backroom deal was presented as a *fait accompli*—the 75-page agreement was released to staff just five days before the commencement of online voting.

As the SEP explained in a leaflet distributed to staff on campus, if the agreement were 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.”

The SEP statement continued: “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.”

So far, neither the NTEU leadership nor the Macquarie union branch has issued any statement opposing the retrenchment announcement. As at other universities, the union will assist the management to implement the job cuts via redundancy packages.

In sharp contrast to this silence, the union has denounced the SEP for campaigning for a no vote. In response to the SEP’s statement, NTEU branch president Cathy Rytmeister wrote to all union members at Macquarie attacking what she alleged were “false and frankly misleading claims” about the enterprise agreement. Her message is a case study in the lies and distortions used by the NTEU at all universities.

Rytmeister defended the agreement as “the best deal we could have achieved under current circumstances” and claimed that it was “what you and your colleagues fought for over a sustained period of industrial and political action.” In reality, as the SEP pointed out, the agreement upholds the very erosion of permanent tenure that staff had opposed. For example, it declares that “casual employment may legitimately be used by the University to address fluctuations in the academic and business cycle.”

The union branch president cited alleged gains for staff, mostly the creation of union-management consultative processes that will only enshrine the union’s role in policing the Labor government’s market-based offensive. She claimed that new categories of fixed-term employment, such as “Early Career Fellowships,” would lead to greater “job security.” These positions are for a maximum of 24 months, with a possible extension of 24 months. As the SEP correctly explained, the purpose of these new classifications is to create a permanent rolling stock of underpaid staff who will be denied any genuine job security.

Contradicting herself, Rytmeister conceded that the deal was “not perfect” and that it gave the university “more flexibility than we would have liked.” For this, she contemptuously blamed the staff, alleging that “the bargaining team can only deliver what the membership is prepared to fight for.” In reality, over the past year members showed repeatedly their determination to resist the university’s demands and their preparedness to take industrial action, even in the face of stand-downs.

At no stage, however, has the NTEU sought to unite the staff with their colleagues at other universities, who were fighting the same threats to their working conditions. Instead the NTEU worked to both isolate members at individual

universities and wear them down in order to create the conditions for ratification votes.

Rytmeister declared that “[the SEP’s] claim that the NTEU bargaining team conspired with management to deliver the Gillard agenda is just nonsense.” Yet the union has imposed similar agreements at more than 30 universities nationally. Macquarie’s job cuts are a devastating vindication of the SEP’s analysis that these agreements have directly paved the way for the wholesale replacement of tenured staff to make way for lower-paid and insecure employees so that universities can compete in the new education market.

The SEP urges the convening of mass meetings of all academic and general staff—independently of the unions—to overturn the enterprise agreements and plan out the broadest possible campaign of industrial and political action to oppose all redundancies and the Labor government’s agenda. The Gillard government’s pro-market restructuring of higher education is part of a wider assault on social conditions and public spending in order to satisfy the demands of the financial markets and impose the burden of the worldwide economic crisis.

As the SEP explained in its July 27 statement: “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.”



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