

Australia: University of Sydney job cuts temporarily postponed

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Planned cuts to academic staff numbers at the University of Sydney have been temporarily postponed after the university and the academics' trade union reached a settlement in the federal Fair Work Australia industrial tribunal requiring the university to engage in consultations with the affected staff.

The University of Sydney had announced last November that 340 academics—10 percent of the university's entire academic workforce—were to be removed from their current positions. In February, university management began offering 100 voluntary redundancies to targeted academics and transferring 64 staff to teaching-based roles. At the same time, the university substantially lifted its student enrolments, in order to secure higher funding under the federal Labor government's new enrolment-based funding scheme.

On March 27, National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) posted on its web site the agreement it had signed with the university after taking action in Fair Work Australia for what it claimed was a breach of the union's current enterprise agreement with the university. Under the deal, the university has simply extended the deadlines for finalising the retrenchments and transfers until May 7, and agreed to abide by the "change proposals" procedures in the enterprise agreement. All redundancies are expected to take effect from August 8, at the start of the year's second semester.

Both sides claimed victory from the settlement. Deputy vice-chancellor Professor Stephen Garton stated: "The university is pleased to report that there has been an agreed resolution of the dispute and that the university's position has been accepted." NTEU University of Sydney branch president Michael Thomson declared that better consultation had been stipulated, and said the union would

continue its "broader campaign" to pressure the university to rescind the cuts.

The reality is that no decision was made to halt the cuts, only to suspend them pending consultations with staff at the local level. It is highly unlikely that any of the cuts will be stopped as a result of this process. In one way or another, the university will achieve its ends with the assistance of the union. Thomson told the *Australian* last year that the NTEU would "abide by the enterprise agreement," which allows management to impose restructuring, so long as various consultations are held.

In essence, the union has "resolved" the dispute within the straitjacket of the Gillard Labor government's industrial relations tribunal, and given the management more time to wear down resistance among the staff, isolate the targeted individuals and pressure them into accepting redundancies or transfers.

There remains serious opposition among both academics and students, however. A March 7 rally to oppose the cuts attracted 700 staff, students and supporters. Another protest is planned for April 4.

The NTEU has also focused its campaign on blaming the University of Sydney management and individual executives for the measures, diverting attention from the underlying restructuring of tertiary education by the Gillard government. A student campaign has generally followed the NTEU's line, focusing on the alleged greed of the university management or its supposed mishandling of the university's funds.

The cuts were first unveiled by Vice Chancellor Michael Spence last November. He declared that the university would aim to reduce administrative costs and

academic salaries by 7.5 percent to save \$63 million for building and infrastructure. The cuts were announced at the end of last year's teaching semester and were scheduled to begin before the start of the 2012 academic year, weakening the ability of academics and students to co-ordinate against them.

To avoid redundancy, academics were arbitrarily required to have published four refereed articles in a prescribed period. A handful of termination notices were successfully appealed by staff but at least 23 voluntary redundancies have been accepted already. Under the Fair Work Australia settlement, these can now be reversed, but the academics involved may be forced to take them again at a later stage.

Further cuts are being carried out through the various faculties, which will have their operating budgets slashed, placing pressure on their course programs and staff numbers. The university has already announced the termination of an English-language program for asylum seekers. The program was originally funded by the Office of the Vice Chancellor but was transferred to the Faculty of Arts, which cut the program as part of the new measures.

What is happening at the University of Sydney is part of a wave of budget and job cuts throughout Australian universities. Deep cuts were announced last year at other major institutions, including the University of New South Wales, Macquarie University and the University of Queensland. At the latter university, \$600,000 was removed from the casual teaching budget in its arts faculty alone.

On March 26, the Australian National University, based in Canberra, announced that it intends to abolish 150 jobs as part of a scheme to cut \$25 million from staff expenses and save up to \$15 million via yet-to-be-defined "improved business practices." Entire departments and units may be closed. In response, the NTEU has taken a similar position as at Sydney, stressing the importance of consultation with the union. In fact, it welcomed the university's offer of "broader and more detailed consultation with staff and the union rather than the arbitrary, top-down University of Sydney approach." The union also committed itself to improving the university's budget surplus, "if that was necessary."

Casual academics, who often work as tutors, are likely to be severely affected at all universities. Casuals now make up 60 percent of the workforce at Australian universities, a trend facilitated by casualisation and flexibility clauses in NTEU enterprise agreements at each university. The cuts at Sydney will no doubt include reduced casual staffing levels, but these have so far not been mentioned in the public discussion over the budget cuts.

The driving force behind these processes is the Gillard government's "education revolution." At the tertiary education level, it features a new funding scheme tied to the actual number of students that institutions enrol each year. This "market" model is designed to force universities, long starved of adequate resources, to compete with each other to recruit larger numbers of students, who are also under mounting pressure to choose vocationally-oriented courses likely to lead to employment.

While the overall number of students is being lifted, the continued underfunding means expanded class sizes, over-stretched facilities and greater reliance on casuals. Large fluctuations in enrolments intensify the resort to casuals, while faculties that fail to attract sufficient students face the constant threat of closure, especially in arts, mathematics and the sciences.

The NTEU strongly backed the return of Labor governments in 2007 and 2010, claiming that they would reverse the deteriorating conditions, rising student-staff ratios and increasing commercialisation of universities. Instead, these trends have been accelerated, with the union working to suppress the resistance of staff and students and facilitate the further subordination of universities to the demands of business and the capitalist market.



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