

Australia: Sydney university staff and students oppose job cuts

Zac Hambides
14 August 2014

Up to 300 University of Sydney (USYD) staff and students rallied on campus yesterday against planned job destruction at campus libraries, then marched to the university chancellery.

The cuts are part of a major restructure outlined in a Draft Change Proposal (DCP). At least 157 library staff will be sacked over the next 17 months as management outsources some services and introduces a robot-operated storage system for the least-used library books and journals.

University administration plans to remove books from the Medical, Dentistry, Badham and Camden libraries and place them in storage or consolidate them at the main Fisher Library. Similar systems already exist at the University of Technology Sydney and Macquarie University. Library cataloguing and acquisitions will be outsourced and restrictions placed on library use by undergraduate students.

Between 60 and 80 percent of current library staff could lose their jobs. Management has already circulated a list of those to be sacked in the first wave of cuts. Students will be deprived of the indispensable services and advice of library workers, who do far more than retrieve books.

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), supported by the National Union of Students (NUS), responded to the announcement with empty appeals to university management to reverse the cuts.

Outside the Fisher Library yesterday, NTEU branch president and ex-radical Michael Thompson presented a petition to the USYD Senate, the university's governing body. Rally speakers included journalist and former Labor Party speechwriter Bob Ellis, award-winning author David Malouf, Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) branch president Grant Wheeler, and Eleanor Morley from the pseudo-left Socialist

Alternative (SAIt).

Morley called for “maximum attendance” at next week's NUS rally against education cuts. Her perspective was elaborated in an article by NUS national education officer Sarah Garnham in SAIt's *Red Flag*, calling for protests to pressure Labor and the Greens to defend education against the Abbott government's budget cuts. “Pressure from below has created the possibility of defeating these attacks. We need to maintain this pressure if we are going to make sure that happens,” Garnham declared.

These claims are a fraud, designed to hide the role played by the unions, Labor and the Greens. The historical record demonstrates that neither the NTEU nor the CPSU have any intention of mobilising their membership, statewide or nationally, to fight the ongoing cuts to university jobs and services.

The same perspective of protests and petitions was advanced by the NTEU in 2011-12 when USYD sacked 30 library staff and placed 500,000 books in storage. That was part of a planned elimination of 340 academic and general staff jobs.

The NTEU worked to dissipate opposition to the proposed sackings, claiming they were a result of an incorrect allocation of resources and “budgeting errors.” The union eventually struck a deal with management to axe at least 55 jobs, on top of many “voluntary redundancies” and force another 100 academics into teaching-only positions—hailing this as a “victory” (see: “Australia: Unions prepare to sell out Sydney university workers”).

Yesterday's petition appealed for “openness and transparency” and a “broader consultation process.” In other words, allow the NTEU and CPSU to negotiate cost-cutting measures.

The situation facing university staff and students is

the result of policies implemented by the previous Labor government, which was propped up by the Greens, and facilitated by the NTEU and CPSU and their pseudo-left supporters.

During 2013, the Gillard government cut university funding by \$2.3 billion. Labor, moreover, replaced university block grants with “demand-driven” financing, creating a “market” for students and paving the way for the Abbott government’s further budget cuts and planned fee deregulation.

Nevertheless, in the 2013 federal election campaign, the NTEU and the NUS, supported by the pseudo-left organisations, promoted Labor and the Greens as a “lesser evil.”

The NTEU has been central to the ongoing job destruction at Sydney and many other Australian universities, overseeing the destruction of thousands of permanent positions (see: “Oppose the job cuts at University of Sydney”). According to the NTEU’s own figures, two out of three academic and general staff members nationally are either casuals or on fixed-term contracts—86,000 and 45,000 respectively out of 200,000.

The latest round of union and pseudo-left protests aim to cover up this record. University workers and students can defend jobs and services only by making a political break from these organisations. They have to turn to other sections of the working class on the basis of a socialist program to put an end to the capitalist system.

International Youth and Students from Social Equality supporters spoke with two library workers, who wished to remain anonymous, and students about the job cuts.

“To take our library off us is sacrilege and we’re going to fight it tooth and nail,” one library staff member said. “What they’re going to do in the first instance is get rid of 157 people, and then they’ll target those who are left ... We’ve been told that there will be more changes in 18 months’ time. They’re trying to get people off the books with long-service leave, sick leave—anyone with entitlements.

“We were told, ‘You shouldn’t be working in a place for more than two years.’ They’ll advertise those jobs, and they’ll bring in people on 457 visas, casuals, students, whoever they can get ... The university head librarian said she wants to hire students because she can sack them more easily.”

Another worker with five years’ experience, and among those slated to lose their jobs, said: “Since I’ve been here, conditions have gone downhill and the actions of management have pushed morale down very low. [Management] are getting the supervisors to check up on ‘shelvers’ all the time ... I think this is being carried out for corporate interests. They’re making it more like a business than a library.”

Patrick, a final year Bachelor of Science student from the outer Sydney suburb of Liverpool, said: “The cuts are going to set back students and what they can afford. You’re going to see a different diversity of students because it will prevent people who can’t afford it from coming to uni. I’m from an area where it’s a struggle for a lot of students to get to uni and where they have to consider going into the workforce quite early.”



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact