Australia: Melbourne university staff strike to defend academic freedom

Patrick O'Connor
7 May 2018

Academic and professional staff members at the University of Melbourne will stop work for four hours on Wednesday in protest against management's efforts to remove references to academic and intellectual freedom in an enterprise bargaining agreement.

The University of Melbourne's moves to undermine academic freedom are part of an ongoing corporate restructuring of the Australian tertiary education sector. Through the "reforms" and multi-billion dollar finding cuts of successive Labor and Liberal-National governments, universities have been transformed into privatised and corporatised entities.

Students are now lucrative "customers," with education an industry classified among Australia's most profitable export sectors. An increasingly casualised and precarious academic workforce is employed on the basis of its ability to deliver "marketable" content.

Academic freedom—that is, the ability of university researchers to use their knowledge and expertise to make public statements regardless of any opposing political and commercial interests of their employers—is now regarded by the Australian ruling class as an antiquated and dangerous threat.

University of Melbourne staff were previously covered by an enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) that specified that academic freedom allowed its staff to "engage in critical enquiry, intellectual discourse and public controversy without fear or favour, but does not include the right to harass, intimidate or vilify."

This clause has been removed from the draft agreement that university management has proposed the National Tertiary and Education Union (NTEU) accept in negotiations that have been held over the past 16 months. The management has insisted that academic freedom should be enshrined in a separate policy document, claiming that the issue is "too important to be governed through an industrial agreement."

In reality, academics are being set up for possible victimisation. Removing clauses from the EBA relating to academic freedom is clearly aimed at facilitating the further disciplining and intimidation of staff.

The University of Melbourne is one of Australia's elite "sandstone" universities and has long served as a pillar of the political and corporate establishment. It is now home to a $13 million research centre for the American arms manufacturing giant Lockheed Martin, which the corporate giant has promoted as the first "multi-disciplinary R&D [research and development] facility" outside the US. The establishment of the centre last year marks another step in Australia's integration into the Washington's preparations for war against its rivals, including Russia and China.

The number of staff at the university who are members of the NTEU has sharply declined as a result of both the increased casualisation of the academic workforce, and mounting disaffection with the union. According to the *Age*, only about 1,500 of the university's 13,600 employees are members of the union. Last month, members voted 93 percent in favour of industrial action.

The fight over the new EBA involves issues in addition to the right of academic freedom. The university is attempting to split academic and professional staff, in an obvious effort to divide the workforce as a means of further driving down salaries and conditions. It is also demanding the removal of existing staff-to-student ratio commitments, restricted salary increment progressions, and the introduction of a new form of "periodic" employment that is aimed at the accelerated casualisation of the academic workforce.

© World Socialist Web Site

All of this is of a piece with the corporate restructuring of the university sector that has proceeded unchallenged by the NTEU over recent decades. The union's efforts to present itself as a challenger to the University of Melbourne's attacks on academics' conditions and rights are a fraud. At Western Australia's Murdoch University, the NTEU recently pushed through a new four-year agreement that has cut real wages, increased workloads, facilitated retrenchments and overturned hard-won conditions.

Last month, at Sydney's Macquarie University, the union pressed for an agreement that could force huge teaching workloads onto at least a quarter of the university's academics. At that university, the NTEU is engaging in a new level of collaboration with management, via so-called "interest-based bargaining," which involves trade unions forming intimate partnerships with employers to implement their agendas.

At the University of Melbourne, in the face of a series of management provocations, the NTEU is seeking to channel opposition among academics and other staff behind the trade unions' campaign to elect yet another pro-business Labor Party government at the next federal election. The strike on Wednesday—scheduled to last just four hours, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.—has been timed to coincide with an Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) rally to "Change the Rules." The union is asking its members to meet outside the university gates then immediately leave to join the official ACTU protest.

This cynical ACTU event is aimed at giving a boost to the unions' expensive television and radio advertising campaign that aims to divert mounting working class opposition to social inequality and corporate exploitation behind the Labor Party's right-wing election campaign (see: "Australian unions launch campaign to re-elect an anti-working class Labor government").

To defend the right to free speech and take forward the fight against university corporate restructuring, academics and university staff need to take their struggle out of the hands of the NTEU and organise rank and file committees, completely independent of the unions, and turn out to students and other sections of the working class facing similar attacks on their conditions.

The attacks on academics are also attacks on the conditions of students and their right to a decent, critically-informed education. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) club at the University of Melbourne, which two years ago defeated a determined anti-democratic drive to deny it affiliation, pledges its solidarity with the striking academics and professional staff. We encourage striking staff to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* to discuss the next steps in the struggle.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site