

Union-management partnership at Australia's Macquarie University will create "two-tier" workforce

Our correspondent
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Despite what one participant called "a lot of concern in the room" at the union's last staff meeting at Sydney's Macquarie University, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is still pushing management's "job families" proposal.

This plan could force huge teaching workloads onto at least a quarter of the university's academics.

A May 31 NTEU industrial brief, issued for the next "enterprise bargaining" meeting on June 19, also praised Macquarie's management for "matching" a 2 percent annual pay rise recently imposed by the union at Western Sydney University.

The "rise" is, in effect, a pay cut, compared to the soaring cost of living. Again, defying clear expressions of opposition at the last meeting, the NTEU is presenting it as a fait accompli.

Intensive NTEU-Macquarie management talks have been underway for months on a new enterprise agreement (EA). According to the industrial brief, the "focus" of the most recent discussions "has been on academic workloads and job families." Without elaborating, the brief boasted of "some important developments" in these areas.

The NTEU's partnership with management is a graphic example of the union's role nationally. Last December, the Liberal-National government inflicted another \$2.2 billion cut over the next four years on universities, which will mean even worse conditions for students and staff alike.

Far from fighting the multi-billion dollar cuts, which the NTEU claims to oppose, the union is imposing their consequences on staff, via EA deals with individual universities.

These agreements provide each university with the cost savings and "flexibility" it is demanding in order to implement the cuts. With funding for domestic students

shrinking, the universities are competing with each other to survive.

The "job families" plan—a euphemism devised through union-management collaboration, in order to appear "user friendly"—will allow Macquarie to impose 80 percent teaching loads, as opposed to the traditional 40 percent teaching, 40 percent research and 20 percent admin load—onto 25 percent of academic staff, thus creating a two-tier workforce. "Teaching-only" academics will bear the brunt of the extra work demanded by ever-increasing class sizes.

The NTEU and management claim that this new mode of employment will be voluntary. In reality, low-paid and casualised academics will be placed under enormous pressure to take such positions.

The NTEU is working with management via "Interest Based Bargaining" (IBB), where the parties identify and set out to achieve their "common interests."

Since 2012, major employers and unions have used IBB, supervised by the federal government's Fair Work Commission industrial tribunal, to impose closures, mass retrenchments, wage reductions and sweeping cuts to working conditions. Through IBB, union officials and delegates are assigned the task of reporting and suppressing any employee opposition to these attacks.

How IBB works was demonstrated in a May 25 letter, sent by NTEU industrial officer Lance Dale to Macquarie University's employee relations manager Leah Angrisano, about the elimination of paid student consultation time for casual teachers at the university's law school.

Casuals carry out an ever-increasing portion of teaching in law, as elsewhere. Scrapping their pay for often-crucial consultation with their students will mean additional unpaid work, and is likely to significantly disadvantage

their students.

Dale warned Angrisano that the union's law school members "are overwhelmingly united in their opposition to the proposed cuts." He suggested a plan to prevent industrial action by convening a "roundtable meeting" to let off steam and devise "alternate strategies" to achieve management's goals.

Dale wrote that "a process of joint problem solving and collaboration" was "far superior to a unilaterally imposed cut" that "is causing deep concern and aggravation" among the union's law school members.

The NTEU is trying to keep a lid on employee discontent across the country. The May 31 industrial brief reported that "major pitched battles are continuing" over EAs at other NSW universities, including University of New South Wales, University of Wollongong, Charles Sturt University and University of New England.

Far from unifying these struggles in a fight against funding cuts, the NTEU is striving to sign retrograde deals at each institution, as it has already done at University of Sydney, Western Sydney University and Murdoch University.

Once again, the NTEU is seeking to channel hostility to the funding cuts into support for the return of yet another pro-business Labor government. The union is backing, and will be represented in, Labor's proposed review of post-secondary education, to be launched within 100 days of it taking office.

This review will seek to further transform the universities into corporate entities, tied closely to the needs of business, and churning out graduates tailor-made for major employers.

Labor's deputy leader, Tanya Plibersek, recently announced that the review panel would feature business leaders, including Business Council of Australia chief executive Jennifer Westacott. Last year, Westacott delivered a National Press Club speech demanding an integrated university-vocational college tertiary education system "joined at the hip to industry."

Labor began the creeping privatisation of the tertiary sector under the Hawke government, which reintroduced student fees in the 1980s. With the support of the NTEU, the Rudd and Gillard governments' "education revolution" set up a competitive "market" for student enrolments, accelerating the exploitation of low-cost casuals. Then the Greens-backed Gillard government cut \$2.7 billion from tertiary funding in 2013.

This year has seen school teachers, university lecturers and support staff engage in a rising strike movement in

the US, Britain and elsewhere, against ever-worsening conditions and the ongoing assault on public education. While, in each case, they mounted courageous opposition to the unions' pro-business agenda, the unions nevertheless managed to betray them in the end, imposing virtually the same conditions their members had rejected.

To fight the ever-deepening corporate restructuring at Macquarie University and every other campus, academics and university staff need to draw serious lessons from the past. Nothing less than a decisive break with the NTEU and the establishment of rank-and-file committees, totally independent of the unions, is necessary. The task of these committees will be to join in struggle with students and other sections of the working class facing similar attacks.

Such a struggle requires a political perspective that is entirely opposed to the NTEU's pro-capitalist agenda; in other words, a socialist program that regards a fully-resourced, high quality education as a fundamental social right, and sets out to reorganise society in the interests of the vast majority, not the ultra-wealthy privileged minority.

To take forward this perspective, the following resolution will be moved at the June 19 Macquarie meeting.

This meeting:

- (1) Opposes the NTEU's pro-business partnership with management.
- (2) Opposes the splitting up of university employees, via individual EAs, and calls for a unified national struggle against the Liberal-National government's latest multi-billion dollar cuts, and the overturn of all previous cuts imposed by both Labor and Coalition governments.
- (3) Demands that billions of dollars be poured into education at all levels, from pre-school to tertiary, to guarantee the social right of all young people to a free, first-class education and the social right of all staff to decent, well-paid and permanent positions.



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