

Staff at Australia's Macquarie University vote for unified fight against government cuts

Our correspondent
20 June 2018

At a meeting yesterday, staff at Sydney's Macquarie University voted in favour of two resolutions moved by Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporters. In the presence of representatives of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), the staff called for a unified national struggle by university workers to overturn the budget cuts inflicted by successive governments and for vastly increased education funding, at all levels, to guarantee the basic social right to free, first-class education.

The meeting was marked by considerable hostility, on the part of the union members present, to the NTEU's efforts to push through a new enterprise agreement (EA), in collaboration with university management. A key EA proposal would introduce a second-grade job classification that would compel up to a quarter of the university's academics to devote 80 percent of their workloads to teaching, with no time for research.

An SEP supporter asked for a show of hands on whether those present believed that the proposed classification, euphemistically described as a new "job family," would be truly voluntary, as claimed by both the union and management. Only two hands went up, and both were those of NTEU bargaining team members.

The staff votes represent a significant rejection of the decades-long betrayals of the NTEU—by splitting up university workers, institution by institution, and cutting EA deals with individual universities. These EAs have invariably involved the erosion of conditions, the casualisation of the workforce and the transformation of universities into corporatised entities.

At Macquarie University, the NTEU is engaging in "interest-based bargaining" (IBB), consisting of backroom talks, based on defining "common interests" between union and management. In plain language, the

IBB means devising schemes to overcome rank-and-file opposition to management demands for further cost-cutting and pro-business restructuring.

In the face of opposition by the NTEU, the meeting of about 36 staff members passed resolutions (2) and (3) below:

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.

The first resolution was defeated, with only 2 votes for, reflecting a certain fear of the consequences of attacking the union. A union branch committee member had declared that if members voted for it, they would be expressing no confidence in the NTEU bargaining team, which would then simply pull out of the bargaining process. "Then you should get a new bargaining team," he warned.

The second resolution was carried, with 13 votes for, 14 abstentions and 9 against. During the discussion, an

SEP supporter drew attention to the union's recent industrial bulletin, which had reported "pitched battles" across the sector, with staff opposing attacks on their conditions and pay, including at the University of Newcastle, the University of New South Wales and the University of New England.

"These attacks are a direct consequence of massive funding cuts by both Labor and Liberal governments over decades, the SEP supporter said. "The NTEU, through the enterprise agreement process, has blocked the unification of these struggles."

Last December, the current Liberal-National government announced the cutting of another \$2.2 billion from universities over the next four years, on top of the \$2.7 billion stripped out of tertiary education by the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government in 2013, but the NTEU has organised no struggle against it.

The third resolution was passed almost unanimously, with 35 for, 0 abstentions and 1 against. Hypocritically, in an attempt at damage control, NTEU officials and bargaining team members voted for it, despite its advocating a perspective that the NTEU has opposed for decades.

During the discussion, some of the measures being implemented by the union-management partnership were exposed, including abolition of the payments made to casual teachers for the time they spend in student consultations.

"This move is a direct consequence of billions of dollars in cuts to the tertiary sector," another SEP supporter said. "The NTEU acknowledges an 'overwhelming opposition' to the cuts by casual staff in law. Why, then, is it trying to prevent industrial action? And why is the NTEU not seeking to broaden the struggle? After all, budget cuts are impacting on the workloads of all staff, both here and across the sector. Instead, the NTEU is seeking a collaboration with management."

A member of the Macquarie University International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) club spoke in support of the SEP resolution, defying an attempt by the NTEU branch president, Alison Barnes, to declare him out of order because he was not a union member. He spoke, nevertheless, insisting that students should be involved in the fight for better conditions for university staff.

Staff members voiced opposition to the union-management "jobs families" scheme, which would establish a two-tier workforce. Traditionally, standard academic workloads consist of 40 percent teaching, 40 percent research and 20 percent administration. Under the proposal, educators pushed into a so-called Teaching and Leadership (T&L) classification would have their teaching loads raised to 80 percent, with no time for research, which is essential for both face-to-face teaching and for career development.

One university worker commented that "for the people who are brought in on T&L, their entire workload will be teaching. There will be no capacity for them to get promoted through research." Responding to a suggestion that academics could do research in their spare time on the weekends, she responded: "Well that's unpaid labour, and that's the model that we are being signed up to."

A young casual staff member from the law school said: "There are 60 casuals in the law school ... if you get one of these [T&L] jobs, you will not be able to apply for a job elsewhere."

The majority support for SEP resolutions (2) and (3) provides a perspective for all university staff. It indicates the emergence of significant opposition to the decades-long betrayals of the trade unions and their suppression of any organised and unified struggle against the cuts implemented by both Labor and Liberal-National governments.



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