

Australia: Mobilise students, staff and academics against the closure of Macquarie University's human sciences faculty

The Committee for Public Education
7 November 2019

More than 200 Macquarie University staff attended a packed National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) meeting at Macquarie University in Sydney's northwest last Thursday to oppose Vice Chancellor S. Bruce Dowton's announcement that the entire Faculty of Human Sciences was to be abolished, or, in his words, "disestablished."

The university also announced a job freeze, with no further offers of employment to be made across the campus without a special exemption from a group of four senior executives, including the vice chancellor and the chief financial officer. Under the freeze no fixed-term contracts will be renewed and even those jobs in the final stages of the selection process will be frozen.

University management is citing a downturn in projected student growth as the reason for both measures. Universities across the country are facing increasing budgetary pressures following decades of budget cuts by both Labor and Coalition federal governments.

According to Universities Australia, \$7.6 billion was cut from university funding between 2011 and 2017, first by Labor and then by the Liberal National Coalition.

In December 2017, the Coalition government imposed \$2.2 billion in university cuts, featuring a two-year freeze on funding for undergraduate enrolments. This meant nearly 10,000 student places going unfunded in 2018, with that number almost doubling this year.

From 2020, new "performance-based targets" will make any funding increases largely dependent on universities "realigning" their course offerings to be more in tune with the requirements of employers and the corporate and financial elites.

Universities have unashamedly used international students and their families as cash cows to prop up their ailing finances. Any fall in international student numbers will have a significant impact throughout the sector. A "Four Corners" report in May, on the lowering of English language entry requirements, pointed to the lengths that universities will go to acquire the lucrative international student trade.

The number of international students studying in Australia

has grown from 250,000 in 2012 to 624,000 in 2017. In 2017, almost 30 percent of all international students studying in Australia were from China. Figures cited by the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted, however, that the number of Chinese students enrolling in NSW universities this year has fallen by 4.3 percent. The Morrison government's ongoing, rabid anti-China campaign, which has especially targeted students, and has been joined by the media and military-intelligence sector, is one of the likely major drivers of this decline.

The Macquarie University NTEU branch has predicted an imminent loss of around 60 professional staff in the Faculty of Human Sciences, along with four staff in the translation and interpreting program. Redundancies are already being targeted at academics in the Faculty of Science (6-8) and job losses have been flagged elsewhere.

Many of the academics and professional staff attending the union meeting were visibly angry and keen to fight back. But as far as the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) bureaucrats were concerned, the meeting's major purpose was to ensure their inclusion in management "consultations," as aides in imposing the university's attacks on jobs, wages and conditions.

The union has initiated no fight to protect these jobs, instead, isolating staff in the affected departments from the support of their colleagues across the university.

At the union meeting, not a single NTEU representative proposed any perspective to mobilise professional staff, academics and students in a unified campaign to prevent the closures and sackings. Nor did they mention the need to turn to their counterparts at universities across the country who are facing similar attacks.

Just three months ago, the Australian National University (ANU) announced the ending of its 40-year-old practical legal training program, the Graduate Diploma of Legal Practice, and the "disestablishment" of its prestigious School of Legal Practice. It will no longer enrol any new students and will only operate until the end of 2021, to "teach-out" current students, potentially resulting in the loss of 29 academic jobs in the College of Law.

Like its Macquarie University counterpart, the NTEU branch at the ANU expressed its “concern,” and “disappointment” at the university’s decision, but failed to mobilise staff and students to defeat it.

Both NTEU branches sought to profitably use the crisis facing the entire campus population for their own purposes, launching a highly visible recruitment campaign outside last week’s meeting.

In the motion passed at last week’s meeting, the union calls for the vice chancellor to “come clean” about the university’s finances, demanding that university management work with NTEU members to develop alternatives to address any current financial crisis.

This is a complete diversion. The source of the funding crisis is not “university mismanagement” but the government cuts and enrolment declines, which are an expression of the global economic crisis of capitalism, including escalating international recession and trade war, which are rapidly posing the danger of another world war.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), both formed by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), reject the positions advanced in the NTEU motion. It is not up to staff to resolve a university budget crisis. It is the federal government’s responsibility to ensure that universities and their students and staff are well funded. Any proposed job cuts must be opposed, and a struggle waged for the democratic right of all to a fully-funded high quality education system across every sector. That requires a unified political and industrial campaign.

In 2007, the SEP warned that the impact of former Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s “education revolution” would be to further privatise Australian universities. We emphasised that the inevitable consequence of subordinating universities to the global capitalist market was ongoing financial volatility, and the consequent destruction of job security. We called for a unified struggle against these measures, which could never have been enacted without the support of the NTEU. The union’s response was to isolate teachers and academics and suppress opposition to the government’s agenda.

In 2009, the union insisted on “no politics,” as it orchestrated an enterprise agreement that allowed increased casualisation and fixed-term contracts, aimed at providing more “flexibility” to university administrations in hiring and firing.

In 2011, during enterprise agreement negotiations, academic staff were stood down after establishing work bans on releasing results at both Macquarie University and UNSW. The NTEU betrayed these workers. It agreed, in a tribunal hearing, to release results for some students, effectively undermining the industrial fight that staff had undertaken. The results were enterprise agreements that gave universities the ability to hire and fire as they pleased, with no restrictions on casual positions.

In the last contract campaign, in 2018, the NTEU worked

hand in glove with university management to develop an enterprise agreement through “interest-based” bargaining, which underscored the mutual interests of union bureaucrats and corporate managements against those of workers. The SEP warned that this would pave the way for cuts and closures.

Macquarie University’s cuts are the product of ongoing attacks on the funding of public tertiary education and of every public service—day care, primary and secondary schools, aged care, health facilities and hospitals, affordable housing, mental health services.

Workers around the world are beginning to oppose these attacks on basic democratic rights. Teachers, nurses and public sector workers across the United States, university staff in Britain, workers in India, France, throughout Latin America, in the Middle East and elsewhere, are raising mass opposition to the accelerating levels of social inequality and austerity in every country.

In an NTEU meeting last year, members of the SEP and IYSSE supporters moved a motion opposing the splitting up of university employees—via individual enterprise agreements—and calling for a unified national struggle against the Coalition government’s latest multi-billion dollar cuts, and the overturn of all previous cuts imposed by both Labor and Coalition governments.

The motion also demanded 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, permanent positions. These motions were passed by a majority of staff at the meeting, yet the NTEU anti-democratically refused to circulate them at Macquarie or any other university, let alone initiate a fight for them.

Support for these resolutions demonstrate that university staff and students want to fight, also shown by the fact that the union’s petition has almost 1,000 signatures. But in order to combat the destruction of jobs, this sentiment must now be translated into the development of independent workplace committees, in direct opposition to the NTEU, and led by the most trusted and self-sacrificing staff, academics and students. These committees must fight to defend every job, department and faculty, not only at Macquarie but in collaboration with university staff and students throughout the country, and around the world, on the basis of a socialist perspective, aimed at defending the interests and needs of the millions of workers, students and youth, not the profits of a tiny wealthy minority.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact