

NTEU appeals for negotiations after Australia's Macquarie University announces massive job cuts

A correspondent
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Macquarie University, in Sydney's northwest, last week became the latest university to announce significant cuts to full-time jobs, accelerating restructuring plans in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

An email from the vice-chancellor to all staff called for "voluntary" redundancies and warned that forced redundancies would follow if the resignations failed to meet an expected \$35 million revenue shortfall this year, and a much bigger loss next year.

According to financial information provided by the university and modelling of staffing costs by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), this would mean eliminating between 600 and 1,000 full-time equivalent jobs. That is up to around a third of the university's workforce.

Far from fighting the job cuts, however, the NTEU has appealed to management to negotiate with the trade union on "proportional savings measures," in return for supposedly "enforceable job protection guarantees to mitigate job losses."

In other words, as it has at other universities across the country, the union is offering to cajole university workers into accepting wage cuts and other attacks on conditions, while still implementing hundreds of job losses. For example, at La Trobe University in Melbourne, the NTEU backed a wage-cutting agreement that allows around 400 redundancies.

The union's policing role was made explicit in an earlier August 11 NTEU letter to Vice-Chancellor Bruce Dowton pleading for collaboration with the union. It said the "NTEU remains open to discussions" in order to "work together collectively on a balanced response to the challenges our University faces."

The letter stated: "As you would be fully aware,

University staff across the nation have shown their willingness to support their institutions to achieve savings measures where negotiations have occurred in good faith with NTEU representatives."

This is a graphic description of the NTEU's deepening role in enforcing the cost-cutting requirements of university managements, provided the union's position as an industrial police force is maintained.

The offer of university workers' "willingness" to sacrifice is based on a totally false record of what has happened this year. In May, outraged opposition by university workers forced the NTEU to abandon its "national framework," which volunteered wage cuts of up to 15 percent, while accepting up to 18,000 job losses nationally. But the union has since only intensified its drive to impose similar cuts on university workers at individual universities.

The NTEU's letter to Dowton indicated the union's readiness to assist in implementing "forced redundancies of staff through managing change processes," provided that he demonstrated that "no stone has been left unturned" in terms of "reasonable savings measures."

No doubt encouraged by this offer, the vice-chancellor's email last week also announced a "strategic alignment" of the academic workforce, including increased use of the "job families" scheme. This scheme, which forces targeted academics to devote 80 percent of their workloads to teaching, with no time for research, was imposed by the NTEU in its 2018 enterprise agreement, despite significant opposition from academic staff.

Reports from inside the university indicate that the

management plans to significantly reduce the number of teaching and research academics through the redundancy process, with many remaining academics to be forced into the teaching classification.

In 2018, NTEU officials presented the new classification as “voluntary,” but many academics rightly recognised that the university could coerce staff into the new classification by performance management and threats of unsatisfactory performance reports.

Last week, the university further announced its intention to reduce the courses that it currently offers, in line with the federal government’s demand that universities align themselves with business needs. This would continue the transformation of universities into vocational institutions, which has intensified since the last Labor government’s “education revolution.”

More than 150 workers from the university attended an NTEU meeting last Thursday, where the union put a motion renewing its call for Dowton to negotiate with the NTEU on “proportional savings measures.” The motion also urged management to borrow funds and asked the vice-chancellor to reduce his annual salary to that of the prime minister, which is \$550,000, or about seven times the median wage.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporters spoke in opposition, pointing out that the motion did not oppose job cuts. Instead, it accepted that workers must pay for the crisis, which is also the result of decades of underfunding by successive governments, both Liberal-National and Labor-Greens. They outlined the call for rank and file committees and the alternative socialist perspective advanced by the SEP’s Committee for Public Education (CFPE).

The developments at Macquarie University underscore the *World Socialist Web Site’s* warnings that the COVID-19 pandemic is being exploited globally to intensify the gutting of working conditions, the slashing of wages and the destruction of full-time jobs, including in public education.

The WSWs warned in 2018 that the Macquarie management’s deal with the NTEU to create the teaching “job family” would force huge teaching loads onto at least a quarter of the university’s academics and would be used as a cost cutting measure by the university.

Workers at Macquarie and all the universities need to reject the position put forward by the NTEU,

governments and management: that workers and students should pay for the crisis of funding in universities and that workers should accept wage cuts and other concessions or face redundancies.

University workers and students need to unite and form rank and file committees, completely independent of the NTEU and other trade unions, to mount a political and industrial struggle on a socialist perspective, which includes the basic social right to a full time job and free high quality education for all.

This is the call issued jointly by the CFPE and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE). We urge all university workers and students who want to take forward this fight to contact the CFPE or IYSSE, both established by the SEP.

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

CFPE

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation/>

Twitter account: @CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)