

University of Sydney staff hold walk-out, protest sackings of entire departments

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About 150 staff and students held a rally at the University of Sydney (USyd) last Wednesday against major further cuts planned by the university management. The latest job losses, which include the destruction of all academic positions at the Learning Centre and Maths Learning Centre, take the attack on jobs and conditions nationally this year to a qualitatively new level.

Some 30 academics from physiology, pathology and other departments in the School of Medical Science walked off the job to attend the protest, as well as staff from other faculties and a group of students from nearby University of Technology Sydney.

As part of the university's plan, all academics in the departments of physiology and pathology not funded through external grants will be forced to re-apply for their positions or apply for redundancies. In physiology, nine full-time positions will be eliminated, cutting the number from 29 full-time equivalents (FTE) to 20 FTE. In pathology, seven full-time positions will be eliminated, from 11.7 FTE to 4.7. That is a reduction of 39 percent FTE across the two departments.

As elsewhere around the country and internationally, university managements and governments are using the COVID-19 pandemic to accelerate pro-business restructuring.

Professor Rebecca Mason, who has been in department of physiology for 33 years, told the rally that the department had acquired such a high research reputation that other institutions were paying significant sums to do their research in it. "It took us 25 years to build this up and it took them [university management] 9 months to totally destroy it."

This is part of a broader assault at the university. In August, a leaked email from Deb Hayes, the head of the School of Education and Social Work, revealed that she

had been asked by the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) to find cuts equalling 30 percent FTE. The proposed cuts in physiology and pathology indicate that similar measures are being implemented across the university.

All 13.6 FTE academic staff at the Learning Centre (LC) and Maths Learning Centre (MLC) are being made redundant, and none of the academic positions will be replaced. The MLC is to be destroyed entirely and faculties will be expected to supply the support to students, under conditions in which academics are already struggling to cope. The staff at the LC are being invited to apply for six professional staff positions as "Learning Success Advisors," without any research capacity and with the added responsibility of training students to provide writing support to other students.

Thus, the physiology and pathology departments, and LC, are being destroyed and supposedly rebuilt from the ground up, while the MLC is being eliminated. Unless defeated, this will set a precedent for the "spill and fill" re-shaping of departments and centres not just at USyd but on campuses around the country. If this can be done at the "prestigious" University of Sydney, then nowhere is exempt.

Across the university, more than 500 staff members reportedly have applied for "voluntary" redundancies. This reflects the role of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) in isolating and suppressing resistance nationally to job losses.

Given the far-reaching character of the cuts the relatively small attendance at the rally is also to be explained by the union's response, not the degree of concern and hostility among staff.

According to an article by Solidarity, a pseudo-left organisation that supports the NTEU, the USyd NTEU branch committee refused to endorse the rally if it was

described as a “walk-out” because that meant “organising unprotected and unlawful industrial action, risking fines under workplace laws.”

What Solidarity failed to mention is that all the trade unions collaborated with the Rudd Labor government in introducing the anti-strike Fair Work Australia legislation in 2009. The NTEU used the legislation it helped implement, in order to suppress broader action by university staff.

The NTEU branch committee, which includes members of the pseudo-left NTEU Fightback group, only endorsed the rally when the academics agreed to remove the term “walk-out” for fear that calling a genuine walk-out could trigger a wider similar response from university staff.

Speaking at the rally, NTEU branch president Kurt Iveson said: “There is a deliberate and coordinated set of cuts that are going on across this campus, all being justified in the name of the pandemic.” But offered no program on which staff and students can oppose this assault. According to Iveson, workers must “hold management to account” by finding “holes” in the data used to justify cuts and then “be noisy about it.”

Even at face value, Iveson’s comments make no sense. If there is a “deliberate and coordinated” attempt by management to cut staff, then what will “being noisy” about data errors achieve? In fact, what Iveson and the NTEU want is for workers to safely vocalise their frustrations to the air while the union continues its collaboration with management, which NTEU admits has already resulted in approximately 90,000 job losses across the country since March.

What is needed is for staff to break from the straitjacket imposed on them by the unions and establish independent rank-and-file committees to oppose the assault on public education and workers’ jobs and conditions.



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