

Australia: Oppose the job and course cuts at Macquarie University!

The Committee for Public Education, International Youth and Students for Social Equality
22 March 2021

The Committee for Public Education and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality call for the formation of joint rank-and-file committees of staff and students to fight the latest slashing of jobs and courses by Macquarie University management.

The cuts unveiled by management last month take to a new and vicious level the unprecedented assault on university workers and students launched across the country and internationally since the COVID-19 pandemic broke out a year ago.

The university's "change proposals" demand the elimination of about 90 full-time academic positions, on top of more than 350 "voluntary" redundancies of academic and professional staff already inflicted in 2020.

Moreover, the proposals insist that academics must compete with each other in "Hunger Games"-style spill and fill processes to determine who will keep their jobs.

Entire teaching and research areas would be eliminated, damaging the quality of education and the range of courses available to students.

This is not just happening at Macquarie. Similar "change proposals" are being pushed through at Western Sydney University and in many other universities. Throughout Australia's 39 public universities tens of thousands of jobs have been destroyed already during the past 12 months.

The Liberal-National government and university managements are using the pandemic's impact on international student revenue, compounded by years of government funding cuts, to accelerate the pro-business restructuring of universities.

Macquarie's "change proposals" identify academics that the university considers "surplus to needs" or not "aligned with its strategic interests." Academics in the faculties of Science and Engineering, Medicine Health and Human Sciences and the Macquarie Business School have been targeted.

In the Department of Physics and Astronomy, for example, 18 academics would have to vie for 13 or 14 positions. In Earth and Planetary Sciences, four senior academics would

be forcibly retrenched and seven mid-level academics would compete for two or three posts, effectively gutting this discipline.

The university plans to issue further "change proposals" in March, June and September to slash another \$25 million from professional staff costs. The "Professional Services Transformation" would impose rolling job cuts throughout 2021.

These cuts will lead to massive workload increases for educators and administrative workers alike. Even then, there will simply be too few academics to teach the units offered by the university.

Not only is this an attack on the university staff. Students are already being impacted. Face-to-face hours in a number of units have been slashed in order to justify the cuts. Units and programs of study have been deleted. Students are facing larger class sizes, lower quality courses and fewer services and facilities.

Universities are being transformed into vocational institutions churning out "job ready" graduates to satisfy the profit needs of employers, axing courses that provide broader critical and intellectual education.

To defeat this offensive, staff and students need new organisations that reject the dictates of the financial markets and their servants.

Far from opposing the cuts, the main trade union covering the universities, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), is helping implement them. It insists that, under the union's 2018 enterprise agreement, the only course open to staff is to engage in management's phony "consultation process."

In 2018, Macquarie staff members voted for a resolution, moved by Committee for Public Education supporters, calling for a unified national struggle against the federal government's funding cuts and opposing the splitting up of university workers via such individual enterprise agreements. The NTEU responded by refusing to circulate the resolution, demonstrating its rejection of that struggle.

Last month, at a meeting of staff members to discuss the

brutal “change proposals,” the NTEU tried to block any discussion at all on such a fight. A Committee for Public Education supporter put the following motion, urging staff and students to:

- Reject the management-union “change proposal” framework as nothing but a vehicle for imposing further cuts to jobs and conditions through the pretence of “consultation.”

- Oppose all efforts to make university workers and students pay for the billions of dollars cut from funding by Coalition and Labor governments over the past decade, and the failure of capitalist governments to avert the global COVID-19 pandemic.

- Demand that, instead of big business being bailed out with billions of dollars, and billions more being handed into the military, resources be poured into healthcare and education funding, to protect the population from COVID-19 and guarantee the basic social right to free, first-class education for all students, including international students, and full-time jobs for all university workers.

- Create rank-and-file action committees of tertiary education workers and students—independent of the NTEU, governments and employers. These are essential to (1) organise a nationwide, unified struggle to defend all jobs and basic rights, (2) protect university staff from unsafe COVID-19 conditions and (3) link up with workers internationally who are facing similar critical struggles against the impact of the worsening global crisis.

This resolution offers university workers and students a way forward, based on an alternative political perspective. But the union refused to put the motion to the meeting, on the divisive basis that the meeting included non-union members. In reality, the NTEU opposes any such discussion because it is working hand in glove with management to ensure that its “savings” are secured.

This has been the role of the NTEU for decades. As soon as the pandemic hit last year, it rushed into backroom talks with the vice chancellors, offering wage cuts of up to 15 percent, supposedly as a “job protection” scheme, but still accepting thousands of redundancies.

When this sparked the beginning of a revolt by university workers, most managements pulled out of that national deal, concerned that the NTEU could not enforce it against its members. But the NTEU then struck similar deals with individual universities, riding roughshod over members’

discontent, paving the way for last year’s tsunami of job losses.

Despite the utter failure of all its parliamentary lobbying efforts last year for a government support package for universities, the NTEU is still trying to peddle illusions that relief will be delivered by the parliamentary establishment, particularly the Labor Party and Greens.

But it was Labor that spearheaded the commercialisation of tertiary education, initiated by the Hawke government’s reintroduction of fees for both domestic and international student fees. Then the Rudd-Gillard 2008 “education revolution” forced universities to fight each other for enrollments, particularly from full-fee paying international students, and cut tertiary funding by \$2.7 billion in 2013.

Labor’s “revolution” was backed by the Greens, which kept the Gillard government in office, and endorsed and policed by the NTEU, in line with the strategic, vocational and profit-making demands of the Australian corporate elite.

In order to reverse this offensive and fight for high quality education, university workers and students need to form their own organisations—rank-and-file committees—to coordinate the growing resistance against the attacks on education, jobs and wages. These committees would become the starting point of a mass movement of the working class to take political power, expropriate the financial elite and reorganise society on a rational, scientific and socialist basis.

To discuss this perspective, and how to fight for it, the Committee for Public Education and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality are holding a joint public meeting for university workers and students on Wednesday, March 31, 2021, 07:00 p.m. (AEDT).

We warmly invite all academics, professional staff and students to participate in this vital discussion. Registration details are here: <https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZApf-GgrjIvGtzc2CYsLefy5zEdIJarfERY>



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