

More destructive job cuts unveiled at the University of Newcastle, Australia

John Harris
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Another round of staff and course cuts has been announced at the University of Newcastle (UoN) in the industrial city north of Sydney. Far from proposing any fight to defeat the attack, however, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is continuing to plead for a cost-cutting deal with management and is volunteering to sacrifice wages and conditions.

On April 1, the NTEU circulated an email to members saying 110 full-time equivalent academic, teaching and professional staff positions would go, with management claiming the further cuts were necessary to overcome a \$35 million deficit as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a show of empathy, the NTEU said cuts would lead to “many hundreds more of our colleagues experiencing the blows to morale, uncertainty and associated knock-on effects of these cuts.” However, the union’s main concern was that “management have made no real effort to explain ... the rationale for change.”

In other words, a supposed better explanation would help the NTEU to suppress opposition to the cuts, as it has done nationally.

Newcastle NTEU branch president Dan Conway’s email said “we must continue to challenge these decisions in all ways we are able to,” but sounded defeat in advance, saying “UON management may not have to listen or agree legally with what we have to say.”

Conway concluded as follows: “Without sounding like management, I want to encourage you all to seek advice from EAP [the management’s Employment Assistance Program] or your own health professional, if you prefer, and if required take personal leave as you manage your own stress levels as a result of management created distress.”

Conway certainly succeeded in sounding like management, preaching resignation and despair.

The latest cuts continue the restructure that began last November, pushing five faculties into three colleges: health, medicine and wellbeing; engineering, science and environment; and human and social futures. Vice Chancellor Alex Zelinsky targeted 530 of the university’s 2,200 subjects and courses for potential discontinuation.

A UoN spokeswoman told the *Newcastle Herald* on March 19 that the restructure aimed to address “financial sustainability,” including overcoming the federal government’s funding freeze in 2017, and the contraction of the international student education market.

The NTEU has paved the way for this further offensive by volunteering cuts to pay and leave entitlements, in line with the union’s “national framework” offer to the employers a year ago. That misnamed “job protection” plan, hatched for weeks behind the backs of university workers, embraced the elimination of thousands of jobs, while slashing wages by up to 15 percent.

Anger among university workers led to the collapse of that national deal after university managements doubted the NTEU’s capacity to enforce the promised cuts. Nevertheless, the NTEU has sought to push through similar sacrifices at individual universities, including Newcastle.

Conway, the branch president, addressed an email to the university on December 16, saying the union was “disappointed management turned down our offer of over \$30 million in savings for 2020, including deferral of 2020-21 pay increases (\$12.8 million); capacity to lawfully direct leave (\$17.2 million); and other temporary measures proportional to the University’s

financial circumstances.”

Conway added: “Despite our disappointment, we continue in our willingness to engage in open conversations that are conciliatory and pragmatic as we go forward into 2021.”

Like all the trade unions, the NTEU fears the growing unrest and hostility among workers to the barrage of job cuts. It is appealing for “conversations” with employers to divert workers back into the same channels of union “consultations” and enterprise bargaining agreements that have helped slash full-time jobs and conditions for decades.

Australia’s public universities have become central targets as big business and governments have exploited the social and economic crisis triggered by their profit-driven failures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic to carry through far-reaching changes to workplace relations.

The cuts at UoN are part of waves of retrenchments and course cuts at universities across Australia and internationally. By the NTEU’s own admission, as many as 90,000 jobs, mostly casual and fixed-term, were lost at Australian universities last year. This has taken to an entirely new level the damage already caused by multi-billion dollar government funding cuts, initiated by the last Greens-backed Labor governments of Rudd and Gillard from 2007 to 2013.

A recent joint public meeting of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), called to discuss how to fight the cuts at Sydney’s Macquarie University and nationally, adopted a resolution offering a way forward.

It demanded 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, including casuals.

The resolution called for students and university workers to jointly establish rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions, which are nothing more than apparatuses to straitjacket workers and enforce the dictates of the corporate ruling class.

Such committees are essential to developing a unified

struggle by university workers and students for the defence of jobs, health and conditions. Above all, these committees will be a means of developing a struggle against the capitalist profit system, which requires a socialist program and perspective to reorganise society on the basis of human need, not private profit and wealth accumulation.



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