

Student-led petition fights lecturer's sacking at Sydney's Macquarie University

Our correspondents
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In just over a week, mathematics students at Sydney's Macquarie University have already won the support of well over 400 students and colleagues for a petition demanding the reversal of an announced retrenchment of a highly-regarded mathematics lecturer.

Dr Frank Valckenborgh was told he was made redundant on June 18 as a result of a "hunger games"-style process. Academic staff members across the entire university were forced to compete for their own jobs, via a "spill and fill" process, as the management sought to forcibly retrench more than 80 full-time academics.

The campaign initiated by the Macquarie University Mathematics Society is an important stand taken by students, in the face of the refusal of the student and staff unions to fight the ongoing government-management offensive against university workers and students, which has seen up to 90,000 jobs eliminated throughout Australia's public universities since the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

As part of the deepening cuts at Macquarie University, the Faculty of Science and Engineering instructed staff that savings of nearly \$6 million had to be made across the faculty's departments, which include Physics and Astronomy, Mathematics and Statistics (M&S), Earth and Environmental Sciences, Biology and Chemistry.

Various staff members were told they had to reapply for their own positions and that between 26 and 34 academics would lose their jobs as a result of a ranking process. A further round of "voluntary redundancies" was opened also. The management calculated that staff, faced with competing with their friends and colleagues for jobs, would fall on their own swords.

The job losses follow more than 350 "voluntary redundancies" inflicted on academics and professional staff members at Macquarie University in 2020. M&S, for instance, was to lose four more positions in the current fill-and-spill procedure, on top of five full-time positions being slashed in 2020. University workers, already facing enormous workloads, would face even more difficult conditions, with the educational experience of students diminishing further.

On the announcement of the forced retrenchment of Valckenborgh, the Macquarie University Mathematics Society (MQMS), led by its president Nora Darwish, launched a petition to Vice Chancellor S. Bruce Dowton and the university's executive management "unreservedly" calling for the overturning of his dismissal, noting that "so many of us have obtained our degrees

because of Frank's commitment to education and teaching."

The petition states: "He is a powerhouse of knowledge and imparts this to his students, his care for his students is indisputable and his teaching empowers students to reach their full potential."

Many students have made heartfelt comments on the petition about Valckenborgh's unstinting contributions of time, effort and expertise in their education. Colleagues commented also on his generosity and scholarship.

"Macquarie has cut far too many staff, enough is enough," was one comment. Another said: "Frank is one of the most passionate lecturers out there and also an extremely knowledgeable, patient teacher. Rarely anyone will sit down with you for 2 hours to make sure you understand something!"

A former student wrote: "I was very fortunate to have Frank as a lecturer when I was an undergraduate student and have experienced his knowledge and passion for mathematics first hand. He was also one of my mentors when undertaking my PhD. I am so grateful for his erudition and unending support."

A psychologist who was employed at Macquarie University as Student Support Officer in the Mathematics Department for 10 years wrote: "I had first-hand experience of the excellence of Dr Frank Valckenborgh's lecturing & engagement with the students. Frank was always willing to devote his time & effort to helping students who had difficulty with any aspect of their Maths... His commitment to the students is legendary."

This response is highly significant, going beyond the defence of Valckenborgh. The reasons provided for signing the petition reveal an appreciation of the need for education and scholarship, and disgust for the cost-cutting measures that have a direct negative impact on students' education, both under-graduate and post-graduate.

In supporting the petition, students are seeking to find independent means of opposing the assault on the universities. A similar petition, signed by more than 900 people, including students and former students, has been launched at Melbourne's Monash University against the effective dismissal of Dr Jan Bryant, who has been teaching as a casual in Monash's Art, Design and Architecture faculty for 11 years, during which she has taught thousands of students, supervised dozens of PhDs and published books, papers and essays.

Such actions everywhere need to be supported and broadened, through the development of joint rank-and-file committees of university workers and students.

Explaining why students are leading the fight to defend Valckenborgh, MQMS president Darwish told the WSWs: “Our aim is to save his job. That will have a knock-on effect to save other people’s jobs. We want to stop the funding cuts to the maths department. Mathematics is the heart of any university.

“I have seen four to five rounds of so-called voluntary redundancies [VRs]. With a round of VRs, everybody’s job is under stress. It means no one’s job is safe. Morale has been low, and I feel sad for esteemed professors being treated like an expendable resource. It’s insulting to education as a whole. This is not how you treat a scholar.

“We have had great support in the past week. Some people have said the most eloquent things. One comment in particular said: ‘He made me love mathematics from a person who dreaded maths and almost got kicked out of class in high school.’ This person had mathematics anxiety and had problems with other professors and was looking at failing. Frank provided help, and the student received a high distinction.

“We are overwhelmed at the response. People remember Frank’s teaching. It’s relevant. A lot of the support is from people who are now working.

“It’s like they have targeted Frank. So many people took VRs... Every day, MQMS are finding out about more redundancies. And we will not be silent and we will not hide the voluntary redundancies...

“I couldn’t agree more with the *World Socialist Web Site* article on the cuts at Macquarie. You write: ‘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.’ That’s exactly true. It’s traumatic for staff. It’s like going through a war at uni. It’s not healthy, and it’s not in the university’s duty of care to the staff.”

Valckenborgh is representative of thousands of tertiary education workers who have lost their jobs, with the pandemic used as the pretext for a further pro-business purging and restructuring of universities. This is only possible because the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has systematically opposed any unified struggle against the onslaught.

Instead, as the drop in international student enrolments exacerbated the billions of dollars cut to education funding by successive Liberal-National and Labor governments, the NTEU quickly offered the employers salary cuts and sacrifices of conditions, while still volunteering to accept the loss of thousands of jobs.

When outraged university workers opposed this falsely-named “Job Protection Framework,” forcing it to be withdrawn, the NTEU pushed through deals at individual universities to satisfy the cost-cutting requirements of the employers and the government.

University workers, as well as students, are increasingly disgusted by the role of the NTEU and looking for alternative means to fight the cuts. Another retrenched Macquarie University academic commented on the “I support Macquarie staff” Facebook site:

“Don’t bother with the union. They missed the boat at the beginning of this attack by going cap in hand to management expecting them to voluntarily submit to measures against their

interests, which obviously they declined to do. If the union had shown some balls and organised actual industrial action straight away we may have gotten at least some of our demands met. As it stands, the NTEU has achieved absolutely zero in stopping or delaying the gutting of our Universities.”

Typifying the NTEU’s part in the job cuts, the union’s Macquarie University branch president Nikki Balnave sent an email to members last week encouraging retrenched academics to seek an internal “review” of their redundancy.

Rather than providing an opposition to all cuts, the NTEU was once again herding academics into the dead end of appealing job losses as isolated individuals within the very framework that facilitated the retrenchments.

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

The motion demanded the basic social right to free, first-class education for all students, including international students, and full-time jobs for all university workers. It called for students and university workers to establish rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions, 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.

These committees will be a means of rejecting the dictates of the corporate elite and its governments and developing the struggle against the root cause of the attacks—the capitalist profit system itself. This requires a socialist perspective to reorganise society on the basis of social need, not private wealth accumulation.

The formation of such a committee is urgently required at Macquarie, and throughout all universities, to fight the retrenchment of Dr Frank Valckenborgh and every other university worker, whether full-time, contract or casual. To discuss how to join this fight contact the IYSSE and CFPE.



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