

Support grows for student petition to fight maths lecturer's sacking at Sydney's Macquarie University

Our correspondents
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Mathematics students at Sydney's Macquarie University have now won the support of well over 500 students and colleagues for a petition "unreservedly" calling for the reversal of the retrenchment of a highly regarded and much appreciated mathematics lecturer and quantum physicist.

The university management formally told Dr Frank Valckenborgh, on June 18, that he was made redundant as a result of a barbaric "spill and fill" process. For weeks, academic staff members like Valckenborgh were forced to compete against each other for their own jobs, across many parts of the university.

Similar previously unimaginable "hunger games"-style procedures have been introduced at other public universities as well, including the universities of Sydney and Queensland, taking to a new intensity the government-management offensive that already eliminated up to 90,000 jobs last year.

Last week, Macquarie management announced that it had now notified 34 academic staff members that they will be made redundant. That was in addition to 126 academics in continuing employment, who were pressured into taking "voluntary" redundancies in 2020 and 2021, and the estimated hundreds of fixed-term and casual positions lost since mid-2020.

Also, as a result, scores of postgraduate students have been left without supervisors, including 40 in Earth and Planetary Sciences, where all but three academics were sacked.

More than 200 permanent jobs among professional staff, whose work supports teaching, research and student wellbeing at the university, have been eliminated and more forced redundancies are planned via a "Professional Services Transformation" project, to slash a further \$25 million in 2021.

This is part of a wholesale assault on university workers and students across the country. The Liberal-National Coalition government and university managements are exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic, on top of years of

underfunding by successive Labor Party and Coalition governments, to accelerate the pro-business restructuring of higher education.

Gifted and respected educators like Valckenborgh, and equally dedicated student and education support staff, are being ousted in order to tie university teaching and research even more closely to the requirements and revenues offered by the corporate elite. Courses are being cut, or shut down completely, if they fail to fit into this framework. Permanent staff are being replaced increasingly by casuals, who can be hired and fired at will to match this agenda.

The petition campaign, initiated by the Macquarie University Mathematics Society, is an important breakthrough, led by students, in fighting back against the refusal of the student and staff unions to fight this historic assault.

Some of the recent comments on the petition underscored the immense gratitude of students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, for the education and guidance provided by Valckenborgh.

One student wrote: "Frank is a very enthusiastic teacher and he is very selfless with his time. One week, he stayed back for half an hour answering my questions, and the next week, 1 hour."

Other comments showed a growing awareness that the fight to defend Valckenborgh raises broader political issues. "Universities should be places of learning, not money-making institutions and in order to have quality education, we need quality teachers," one stated.

Another comment pointed out that "Exceptional universities are made up of committed lecturers, student engagement with better tutorials and student learning outcomes and high levels of student knowledge on graduating. To force redundancy is not a solution, to lose quality lecturers, who encourage student engagement in tutorials is definitely wrong. Find another option and keep excellence in universities and the stand out employees, who

make that difference. Think outside the square, demand government funded universities, as many politicians in parliament today have had fee-free university education, while students today are forced to pay huge fees, and will struggle to buy a home, due to debt accumulated to graduate in selected employment fields. This isn't democracy."

By backing the petition, students are seeking to find their own means of opposing the assault on the universities. Another petition, signed by nearly 1,000 people, including students and former students, has been launched at Melbourne's Monash University, against the effective dismissal of Dr Jan Bryant by the institution's Art, Design and Architecture faculty.

Similar actions need to be developed, supported and broadened everywhere, through the creation of a network of joint rank-and-file committees of university workers and students.

This means a direct struggle against the staff and student unions, which have suppressed widespread opposition to the destruction of jobs and conditions, and blocked any unified struggle by university workers and students.

The latest example of the unions' role is a June 28 media release by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) national office, about the job cuts at Macquarie University. After listing the latest confirmed redundancies, it proposed absolutely nothing to fight them!

Instead, the NTEU complained that university management "has shown no interest in working with the NTEU to look for alternative solutions to unsustainable job cuts, such as borrowing, cuts to executive pay, or cuts to capital expenditure." In other words, the union is pleading with management for a partnership to identify other means of imposing the government's crippling funding cutbacks.

In fact, the media release declared that Macquarie workers were willing to make more sacrifices to help inflict the government's agenda. It stated: "In the early days of COVID, staff at Macquarie were willing to share the pain by taking pay cuts to protect jobs, if they had a chance to see the books. But management claimed this wasn't necessary."

This is a blatant defence of the NTEU's widely-opposed national "Job Protection Network," which offered wage cuts of up to 15 percent, and still volunteered to accept thousands of sackings. The union was forced to abandon the plan, after outrage among its members led to university managements pulling out of the arrangement, concerned that the NTEU would not be able to enforce it.

NTEU officials then proceeded to push through similar pacts with individual universities throughout last year, blocking any nationwide struggle, and are now trying to strike further rotten deals with them via enterprise bargaining agreements.

In the NTEU media release, the union's Macquarie branch president Nikki Balnave said it was a "sin" to make academics and professional staff "pay for the mistakes of management and the ignorance of the federal government." This covers up the reality. It is not "mistakes" and "ignorance" driving the destruction of jobs and conditions. It is a definite pro-corporate program.

The union has no opposition whatsoever to this agenda, which is dictated by the financial markets and wealthy elite that dominate the capitalist profit system. Far from fighting against this destructive program, the NTEU is trying to divert angry university workers into the dead end of appealing for job losses via union-management internal "review" mechanisms, or taking cases to the Fair Work Commission, a government industrial tribunal.

Typifying this atomisation process, Balnave sent an email to members last month, encouraging retrenched staff members to seek an internal review of their redundancy.

A joint online public meeting of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) has been called for Saturday July 17 at 4pm to discuss how to take forward the fight to defeat the cuts at Macquarie and nationally.

The meeting will advance the necessity for students and university workers to establish a network of joint rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions. This is essential to initiate a nationwide, unified fight against the assault on jobs and conditions, and link up with workers internationally, who are facing similar critical struggles against the impact of the worsening global crisis.

That requires a struggle against the capitalist profit system itself, and the turn to a socialist perspective, to reorganise society on the basis of social need, not private wealth accumulation. To participate in the joint online public meeting register here.



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