

# Growing opposition to sacking of arts educator at Australia's Monash University

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5 July 2021

A petition calling for the reinstatement of Dr. Jan Bryant, a highly regarded academic and educator at Melbourne's Monash University, has received nearly 1,000 signatures.

Bryant specialises in art history and theory, fields that are crucial to critical and cultural understanding. The petition points out that many of her PhD students "will be left in the lurch" as a result of her dismissal.

Bryant has been teaching on short-term contracts in the Art, Design and Architecture faculty for eleven years, educating thousands of students, supervising dozens of PhD students, and publishing books, papers and essays.

One of Bryant's former students said in a comment on the petition website: "I wish for secure and fair working conditions for everyone. Also, Jan's talent and dedication played a huge role in me not only finishing my degree but refueling my love of learning and the art world."

According to the petition, the university advertised Bryant's role, for which she reapplied, but neither she nor anyone else was given the role. Bryant is quoted in the petition statement as saying: "I've struggled with 11 years of insecure work, but through that time have worked hard, and been dedicated to my teaching and research, only to discover that my contract is not being renewed."

The petition has won a strong response from staff and students at Monash and more broadly. However, it is also a cynical attempt by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) to posture as a defender of Bryant and university workers more broadly. The petition was launched by Ben Eltham, the Monash branch president of the NTEU, which has blocked any unified nationwide struggle against the assault on university jobs and conditions.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread in March last year, an estimated 90,000 university workers have lost their jobs, as university managements have sought to protect their profits at the expense of teaching and professional staff, and the courses and conditions of students.

The NTEU has negotiated away wages, jobs and conditions in deals with managements on every campus around the country, including at Monash, where hundreds of jobs have been slashed.

In June 2020, the Monash branch of the NTEU adopted the union's fraudulently-named "Jobs Protection Framework" (JPF), which allowed employers to cut wages by up to 15 percent and still eliminate "at least 12,000 jobs nationally."

In an email to Monash University staff on June 16, 2020, NTEU Victorian state division secretary Dr. Melissa Slee attempted to cajole staff into accepting the JPF, which she claimed "allows the university to make cost-saving measures, that share the burden across all staff, to save 190 full time equivalent roles."

She assured staff that "supporting the Jobs Protection Framework" would mean "ensuring that Monash University does not go down" a "destructive path."

While most universities abandoned the deal to pursue similar pacts with individual NTEU branches, after outraged opposition from university workers, the NTEU at Monash proceeded with the framework under the guise of "protecting jobs." In fact, the university announced in July, 2020 that 277 jobs would still be slashed under the JPF.

The deal agreed upon by the Monash NTEU and management included a delay in pay rises, a leave-purchase scheme and a moratorium on bonuses, introduced on the bogus pretext that concessions would save jobs. The university's 2020 annual report noted

that its “cost-cutting measures” had yielded a profit of \$259 million for 2020.

Last September it emerged that Monash management had begun using the JPF to institute a major restructure of its courses, including junking the Centre for Theatre and Performance and other arts programs. Management targeted teams and individuals with “Voluntary Separation Packages.”

The union wrote a feeble “response” last October, and refused to mobilise workers in opposition to the restructure or the job losses. Now the NTEU is trying to use Bryant’s plight to whitewash its role, but it clearly cannot be entrusted with the fight against the assault on jobs, conditions and wages.

The WSWS spoke with Sofia, a Monash law student and casual university worker, about the issues raised by Bryant’s dismissal. She said it was “pretty damning when you consider that the workload of university workers has actually increased in 2020, while their pay has decreased and they’ve cut jobs.”

Sofia continued: “[A]ny student knows that academics are what makes the experience. They’re the ones that disseminate their knowledge and passion, and they’re the ones that engage students.”

Bryant’s dismissal was part of a “trend” at Monash. “Monash has just hollowed out the education ... It resonated with me because, while I didn’t know Dr. Jan, I know of some law faculty academics who are leaving apparently ‘voluntarily,’ but there might be more factors at play.

“There have been lots of comments from law students who have reacted with surprise and sadness. And students aren’t ignorant of the reasons. They’ve said it’s voluntary, but it’s definitely to do with staff layoffs, increased workload for remaining staff and massive budget cuts. Students are quite aware of what’s happening and are really sad that we’re losing some brilliant academic minds.”

Sofia added that universities were using the COVID-19 pandemic “as an excuse” for further cuts. “Coronavirus exacerbates that, but it follows the trajectory we’ve been on in higher education,” she said.

Sofia said the NTEU’s attempt to posture as a defender of Bryant “is ironic considering they were trying to undermine pay and conditions just last year. You can’t just defend one individual, but not defend

workers as a whole against the university. It is a veneer to say ‘we care about this one academic,’ yet [the NTEU’s] actions last and this year indicate that they don’t care about academics.”

Sofia noted the support being won by the campaign launched by students at Sydney’s Macquarie University in defence of highly-regarded mathematics lecturer Dr. Frank Valckenborgh. She said the coronavirus pandemic “has shone a light on the systematic problems in the universities, which is why you see the outcry about Jan and Frank.”

Sofia agreed that students and academics uniting in a common fight “is the only thing that’s going to make a change at universities. The executives aren’t going to do it out of the goodness of their hearts. We’re starting to flex our muscles and there are encouraging signs for the future. Otherwise, standards at universities are going to continue to decrease.”

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 4 p.m. to discuss how to take forward the fight to defeat the cuts at Macquarie, Monash 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. To participate in the meeting register here.



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