

Australian university union celebrates “voluntary” job losses as “resounding success”

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8 July 2021

Developments at Brisbane’s University of Queensland provide a case study in the role of the trade unions in defusing opposition among workers to the demolition of jobs and conditions, and then delivering the requirements of the ruling elite.

Amid an ongoing government-management offensive, exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic to eliminate tens of thousands of jobs across Australia’s public universities and accelerate the pro-corporate restructuring of higher education, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) reported in the July edition of its *Advocate* magazine:

“NTEU members at the University of Queensland (UQ) Architecture have successfully fought a proposal from Management to disestablish their positions and make them apply for their own jobs—a process called a spill ‘n’ fill.

“The ‘Save UQ Architecture’ Campaign declared victory in April, forcing Management to rethink their proposal. Victory came after a brilliant, six-month campaign involving NTEU Members, other staff from the UQ Architecture School, the wider university, and the community (including Architecture professionals and alumni from right across Australia).”

This “victory,” however, consisted of the union convincing five academics to take “voluntary redundancies” in order to satisfy the cost-cutting demands of management, whereas the original “spill and fill” proposal would have cut two jobs. Management’s “Hunger Games” style plan, unveiled last November, had sought to compel 20 academics to compete with each other for 18 positions to match “a new operating model and academic profile.”

In effect, the stand taken by the members of the architecture school, who met and rejected this brutal and unprecedented scheme, was diverted by the NTEU into

processes that assisted management to implement its agenda.

A campaign launched by the school members against the management blueprint had won widespread support. A petition, which attracted more than 1,221 signatures from staff and the community, was displayed at a large rally on the campus, before being presented to the head of the architecture school in late 2020.

But the NTEU channelled the fight away from a broader struggle against the wholesale assault on university workers and students, which the union itself estimates destroyed up to 90,000 jobs during 2020.

In fact, the “Hunger Games” at UQ, together with similar plans at Sydney University and Macquarie University, marked an even more brutal stage in this offensive, which is being spearheaded by the Liberal-National Coalition federal government, on top of more than a decade of punishing funding cuts, initiated by the previous Greens-supported Labor Party government.

The NTEU side-tracked the resistance of the UQ staff and students into a token “consultation” process contained in the union’s enterprise agreement with management, and then into a legal appeal to the Fair Work Commission (FWC), the industrial tribunal established by the last Labor government.

Kelly Greenop, an NTEU Workplace Representative from the School of Architecture, told the *Advocate*: “Apart from the petition and actions, members worked and organised together to create a collective submission to management’s proposal that would clearly show workable alternatives and the lack of necessity in management’s proposal.”

Nevertheless, management rejected the “robust, informed and detailed feedback” that the NTEU organised via this submission.

The NTEU took the dispute to the FWC, claiming that management had breached its obligation to provide information and consultation under its enterprise agreement.

The tribunal ruling shattered the illusions that the union promoted in this course. It declared that UQ management had the right to undertake a “spill and fill” process to force staff members to reapply for a slightly different version of their jobs, also setting a precedent for use elsewhere.

Ultimately, the NTEU proposed “much better alternatives” to management. One of them was for the union to conduct a survey “to ask if any staff would voluntarily accept a redundancy to make up the short-fall between the current number of Academics in the School and the number proposed by Management.”

Once some staff indicated they would be willing to leave, management agreed that if five people accepted voluntary redundancies, then it would withdraw the “spill ‘n’ fill” scheme.

Greenop told the *Advocate*: “Five staff did step forward and took ‘one for the team.’ We acknowledge and thank our five colleagues who have chosen this path, and appreciate immensely what they have done.” She commented: “Asking if anyone wanted to go has to be a more humane, sensible way of going about this. Anything has to be better than making all the academics reapply for their positions.”

In reality, the outcome will only embolden the government and university managements to escalate the assault on educators and students, counting on the capacity of the NTEU to continue to extract such sacrifices from its members.

The union has applied such methods across the country since the pandemic began, as a means of stifling resistance to job cuts and blocking a unified struggle against the onslaught. Educators and professional staff members have been encouraged to take “voluntary” retrenchments to enable the employers to carry out their cuts and restructuring without igniting a revolt by university workers and students.

This became a crucial mechanism by which the NTEU has collaborated with managements to impose their requirements since furious university workers opposed and triggered the collapse last year of the union’s “Job Protection Framework,” which volunteered wage cuts of up to 15 percent and at least 18,000 job losses as soon as the coronavirus pandemic began.

Never before has the union been so blatant in openly

hailing “voluntary” job destruction as a victory. The *Advocate* article, written by NTEU Queensland senior state organiser Mike Oliver, concludes:

“Thanks to the campaign by members and the sacrifice of five staff, jobs and livelihoods have been saved. The NTEU campaign—which involved so many from within the School, across UQ and the wider profession and communities of interest—was a resounding success.”

By contrast, students at Macquarie University have launched a petition campaign against the “Hunger Games” at their university, centring on the demand for the reinstatement of a highly-appreciated mathematics educator, Dr Frank Valckenborgh. Altogether, dozens of academics have been retrenched at Macquarie by this process, despite the NTEU already stifling resistance to more than 300 redundancies of educators and professional staff members in 2020, mostly by “voluntary” departures.

In response to this important initiative by students, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) have called a joint online public meeting on Saturday July 17 at 4 p.m. 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 NTEU and the student unions, which have also opposed any unified struggle against the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs and the shutting down of courses.

This is essential to initiate a nationwide fight against the assault on jobs and conditions, and link up with students, educators and all workers internationally who are facing similar critical struggles against the impact of the worsening global public health and economic crisis.

That means challenging the dictates of the capitalist profit system and turning to a revolutionary socialist perspective based on the working class taking power in order to totally reorganise society in the interests of all, instead of the financial elite.

To participate in the joint online public meeting register here.



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