

University of Sydney meeting supports students' campaign in defence of Macquarie University academic

Our correspondents
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An online meeting of over 440 staff at the University of Sydney (USYD) last Wednesday passed a resolution in support of the campaign launched by students to demand the reinstatement of Dr. Frank Valckenborgh, a highly-appreciated mathematics lecturer at Macquarie University who was told last month that he was being made redundant.

The resolution, which was presented from the floor by a member of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), established by the Socialist Equality Party, stated: "This meeting of the University of Sydney National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) branch supports the fight initiated by students at Macquarie University for the reinstatement of Dr. Frank Valckenborgh.

"We oppose the Hunger Games-style destruction of jobs at Macquarie University, the University of Sydney, and all other universities. University staff are not responsible for the pandemic, or the pro-market restructuring of universities and we should not have to pay for it."

According the NTEU officials, 96 percent of those present voted for the motion. That is another indication of the underlying striving by university workers and students to fight the ongoing historic offensive against jobs and conditions, which has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This sentiment contrasts with the opposition of the NTEU to any unified nationwide struggle, which has allowed the assault to deepen, with the latest being the axing of 130 professional staff jobs at Adelaide University, rationalisation of "underperforming" programs and courses, and a "review of the academic workforce."

Moving the resolution, the CFPE member said: "We should take our lead from the students at Macquarie University. The NTEU has shown it will not carry forward a unified struggle. Last year it allowed up to 90,000 university jobs to be destroyed."

The brutal "spill and fill" regime used by Macquarie University to sack Valckenborgh by forcing educators to compete with each other for a slashed number of jobs has been paralleled at other departments and universities. That includes the architecture department at the University of Queensland, where the NTEU responded by convincing five academics to take "voluntary" redundancies. In November last year staff in USYD's pathology and physiology departments were told the number of academic positions in the two departments were being reduced from 41 to 25, and they would have to reapply for jobs.

Wednesday's meeting was called to vote on the NTEU's log of claims for the start of union-management negotiations on a new Enterprise Agreement (EA). The meeting exposed the line-up behind the union leadership by representatives of pseudo-left groups, who all hailed the deliberately vague log of claims.

NTEU state secretary Damien Cahill set the leadership's tone for the meeting by saying the current Liberal National government was "actively attacking universities." He was silent on the role of previous Labor Party governments in cutting university funding and implementing pro-market reforms.

Cahill claimed that enterprise bargaining "is our opportunity to come together collectively as union members and begin the process of building back better."

The record shows that the opposite is true. Over the past three decades, enterprise agreements have been the mechanism for the imposition of sweeping pro-business restructuring measures, as well as the job destruction over the past 18 months.

Likewise, USYD NTEU branch officials insisted that the log of claims would improve working conditions, despite the largely meaningless language leaving wide scope for the union to strike further regressive deals with management.

The CFPE member who moved the resolution on Valckenborgh called for the entire log to be rejected. By contrast to the empty proposals for “protections” against excessive or uncompensated overtime, the only concrete measures were for closer partnerships between the management and union representatives on consultation committees.

The CFPE member warned that the union-management committees would be the mechanisms for implementing further cuts. He also opposed the union’s acceptance of casual contracts and called for them to be abolished in favour of full permanency for all staff.

“We need to oppose the decades-long restructuring agenda by Labor and Coalition governments at the behest of corporate elite, which the NTEU’s enterprise agreements have facilitated,” he said. “Universities must be transformed into educational institutions and not businesses. We need a broad movement of academics, staff, and students against the restructuring.”

The CFPE member called for the formation of a rank-and-file committee to organise a fight against the assault on jobs and conditions, and concluded by inviting those present to attend the joint CFPE and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) online public meeting on Saturday July 17 at 4 p.m.: “Oppose the job cuts at Macquarie University! Build rank-and-file committees to defend public education!”

By contrast, members of various pseudo-left fronts, such as NTEU Fightback, the Casuals Network and the National Higher Education Action Network, spoke or posted chats to praise the log of claims and defend it against criticism by rank-and-file union members.

One told the meeting she was “really happy with this log of claims.” It was “actually quite impressive” and “the most concrete log of claims we’ve ever had.” That

was straight after a casual academic objected that the log was too vague on the conversion of casuals to permanent staff.

The casual educator said the document could mean a continuation of being employed in both semesters every year for seven years, but denied full-time status.

Other pseudo-left representatives hailed the “consultative” process through which the log was drafted. Small working groups had discussed aspects of the log. Essentially the purpose was to incorporate people into the union-management bargaining straitjacket. For the pseudo-lefts, this was another opportunity to seek posts within the union hierarchy.

In this way the pseudo-left members sought to shut down all opposition from staff, helping the NTEU officials to secure a vote to endorse the log of claims, with 12 votes against.

That underscores the necessity for the formation of a network of joint rank-and-file committees of staff and students, completely independent of the union, to initiate a unified 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 rejecting the dictates of the financial elite and turning to a socialist program based on the working class taking power in order to totally reorganise society in the interests of all. The joint CFPE-IYSSE meeting on July 17 will outline and discuss this perspective. To participate you must register here.



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