

Online public meeting in Australia: Oppose all the job cuts at Macquarie University and nationally! Build rank-and-file committees to defend public education!

15 July 2021

Developments this week at universities across Australia have underscored the critical importance of the joint online public meeting called by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) this Saturday, July 17 at 4 p.m. (AEST). Click here to register.

The meeting will discuss how to take forward the fight against the deepening cuts and pro-business restructuring at Sydney's Macquarie University and nationally. In the latest wave, hundreds of job losses, accompanied by course closures, were unveiled this week at the University of Western Australia (UWA), Adelaide and La Trobe universities.

In response to the ongoing historic assault on university staff and students, members of the Macquarie University Mathematical Society took a stand. The students launched a fight to reinstate a highly-regarded lecturer, Dr. Frank Valckenborgh, who was among those targeted for retrenchment.

Very quickly, the student-led petition to defend Valckenborgh received the support of more than 500 pupils and staff. At the same time, the announcement of the July 17, IYSSE-CFPE public meeting and coverage of the campaign on the *World Socialist Web Site* won wider support, including an overwhelming vote by a meeting of about 450 staff at the University of Sydney for a resolution of support moved by a CFPE member.

In an obvious move to head off the broader fight triggered by the sacking of Valckenborgh, the Macquarie University management suddenly told him on Thursday that it had found him a new post, as a teacher of both maths and statistics, apparently because

another academic had decided to resign.

Even if this offer is confirmed in writing, which it has not yet been, this still allows the overall cuts to the mathematics department, as well as throughout the university and nationally, to go ahead. The powerful response to the campaign, which has secured a job for Valckenborgh for now, must be taken forward.

The issue is not just Valckenborgh. He was made redundant in a "Hunger Games"-style process, in which educators had to compete against each other for a reduced number of positions. Dozens of academics are being retrenched in this manner at Macquarie, on top of more than 300 redundancies of educators and professional staff members in 2020.

Similar brutal "spill and fill" exercises are underway at numerous other universities, especially aimed at much-appreciated and dedicated educators such as Valckenborgh, and tying universities more closely to the narrow vocational and research requirements of big business.

This corporate-government offensive has already seen up to 90,000 jobs destroyed last year, counting the laid-off casuals, and over 2,100 courses and 160 programs cancelled, severely affecting the education of students.

And nationwide, the COVID-19 pandemic has been used as the pretext for an entire pro-corporate restructuring of class relations in education and throughout the working class.

The passionate and broad support for the Macquarie petition indicates increasingly conscious opposition to the vandalism of public education over decades by successive Liberal-National and Labor governments. One student wrote: "Universities should be places of

learning, not money-making institutions and in order to have quality education, we need quality teachers.”

Other petitions have been initiated now as well. One at Melbourne’s Monash University opposes the effective retrenchment of Dr. Jan Bryant, a highly-regarded art history and theory academic and educator.

Another, launched by students at UWA’s School of Social Sciences, gathered nearly 5,000 signatures within four days to oppose the gutting of that school, which includes virtually eliminating sociology and anthropology.

Each petition has produced outpourings of disgust at the escalating pro-corporate restructuring of universities at the expense of scholarship and genuine education.

In the words of one comment on the UWA petition: “Universities should represent the greatest depth of curiosity & desire to understand the nature of human existence—these cuts highlight a focus on supporting disciplines which make money at the expense of those that ask questions.”

The July 17 meeting has been called because such student-led actions need to be supported and deepened. This means a direct struggle, not just against the government but 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.

Far from fighting the cuts, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has repeatedly worked with university managements to find ways of saving money, including cutting pay and conditions for staff.

Most recently, at the University of Queensland’s architecture department, the union claimed a victory after convincing five academics to quit their jobs instead of two positions being eliminated in a “spill and fill” regime. Anxious to head off the resistance of the staff, the NTEU said this was a “resounding success” after dragging its members through the dead ends of internal review and the Fair Work Commission.

New genuine working class organisations must be built to break out of the deadly union straitjacket. The IYSSE and CFPE public meeting on July 17 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 students, educators and all workers internationally who are facing similar critical struggles against the impact of the worsening global crisis.

That means rejecting the dictates of the financial elite. It 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. We urge all educators, students, workers and youth to join us. To participate in the online public meeting register here.



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