

Australia: CFPE/IYSSE meeting calls for rank-and-file committees to fight education cuts

Our reporters
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Academics, university staff and students, workers and youth took part in a lively online public meeting last Saturday to discuss the political issues posed by the historic government-management offensive against university jobs and conditions in Australia and internationally.

Many questions were raised and answered about the need for a network of rank-and-file committees to fight against the ruling elite's exploitation of the COVID-19 pandemic to accelerate the pro-business restructuring and decimation of public education.

A full video of the event can be viewed below.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) called the joint meeting in response to a petition campaign launched by students at Macquarie University last month demanding the reinstatement of a highly-appreciated mathematics lecturer, Dr Frank Valckenborgh. He was sacked as part of a brutal Hunger Games-style operation throughout the university, forcing academics to compete against each other for a drastically reduced numbers of jobs.

Within two weeks, the petition received more than 500 signatures, accompanied by passionate comments from students, expressing deep-felt support for the defence of educators and education. This was taken further by coverage on the *World Socialist Web Site* and by CFPE and IYSSE members, which included the overwhelming adoption of a resolution of support moved by a member of the CFPE at a meeting of 450 staff at the University of Sydney. Similar student-led or student-supported petitions were also initiated against retrenchments and course closures at Melbourne's Monash University and the University of Western Australia.

Just two days before Saturday's public meeting, in an obvious move to head off the broader fight triggered by the sacking of Valckenborgh, the Macquarie University management suddenly told him last 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, it still allows the overall cuts to the mathematics department, as well as throughout the university and nationally, to go ahead. There was strong agreement that the powerful response to the campaign, which appears to have secured a job for Valckenborgh, at least for now, must be taken forward.

Chairing the meeting, Mike Head, an educator at Western Sydney University (WSU) and member of the CFPE and SEP, said the students had taken a significant stand against the intensifying job cuts and pro-business restructuring of universities and issued a clear warning about the role being played by National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU). He explained the global context in which the meeting was being held and the resurgence of working class struggles in the US and internationally.

The first speaker, Zach Diotte, the president of the IYSSE club at WSU, explained that the opposition among students in Australia was part of an international movement, including strikes by students at New York University and Columbia University, in New Zealand and the UK, and mass protests by high school pupils in France.

"Students like me and those who have turned to the IYSSE are tired of education being turned into a privilege for the affluent layers of society through the increase of course costs, the continuing inaccessibility to quality education in low economic areas, as well as the restructuring of curriculums to better suit the interests of big business and the government," Diotte said. "This is our future at stake. Education is a right! A right whose struggle the students here at Macquarie have joined."

Diotte called for students to turn to the working class, "the only social force that can overturn this assault. The fight for education can only be won by linking it to the fight against climate change, war, fascism, job cuts, and social inequality. This can only be done through a socialist program."

Diotte explained that this required a break from the pseudo-

left tendencies that claim to be socialist, but “seek to deflect students’ and workers’ opposition to capitalism away from revolutionary politics. When strikes have broken out in factories or protests have begun on campuses these organisations have told the workers and students to trust the unions who subsequently sold out their struggles.”

The final speaker, Chris Gordon, a mathematics lecturer at Macquarie and member of the CFPE and SEP, explained that the collaboration between the unions and management since the COVID-19 pandemic began, which had resulted in the destruction of up to 90,000 university jobs, and over 2,100 courses and 160 programs, in 2020, was not an aberration.

“The unions have functioned as industrial policemen for decades, especially since the Accords with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments in the 1980s and 1990s,” Gordon said. Referring to the introduction of Fair Work legislation in 2009 by the Rudd-Gillard Labor government, the speaker noted that the unions had helped draft these repressive laws.

Gordon explained that Labor governments had been at the forefront of the commercialisation of tertiary education. Fees for domestic and international students were re-introduced by the Hawke government in the 1980s, followed by the Rudd-Gillard government’s “education revolution,” which forced universities to fight each other for enrolments, particularly from full-fee paying international students, and then cut tertiary funding by \$2.7 billion in 2013.

“University workers and students are posed with a struggle not just against the governments and university managements, but against the unions and the Labor Party,” Gordon said. “A new political perspective is needed, with new organisations, completely independent from the unions.”

Gordon called for the creation of a network of rank-and-file committees, controlled by and answerable to the workers, to carry forward a counteroffensive by the working class. Such committees would link university students and staff across the sector with the working class as a whole in Australia and internationally and fight on the basis of a socialist perspective.

The meeting included important contributions and questions from residents of Shepparton in rural Victoria where the state Labor government is preparing to amalgamate four public schools into a “super school” of 2,700 students, producing widespread opposition among residents.

Robyn, a Shepparton resident who has been active in the campaign against the amalgamation, said in a chat comment: “The elite in Shepparton get more say in our children’s education than we do as parents. They are streamlining

students into what they want them to do, not what the students actually want. The AEU [Australian Education Union] has been useless and continues to support the government, not the teachers. Teachers have been gagged and cannot speak out publicly. We have lost so many good teachers, with more that will be let go as this new school opens next year.”

Colleen, who also is fighting the Shepparton amalgamation, asked if parents and grandparents could join the rank-and-file committees. “There is a lot of anger out there as parents see their children channelled into local corporate needs rather than follow their dreams,” she commented.

Sue Phillips, the national convener of the CFPE, replied in the affirmative. She said parents, grandparents, students, teachers and community members needed to be part of the formation of networks of rank-and-file committees.

“The capitalist class does not want the vast majority of kids to be critical about society. They want kids who will agree to whatever, have the basics, and if necessary be driven off to the next world war. What is happening in Shepparton is a microcosm of the crisis that is taking place in public education overall.”

These committees had to be completely independent of the unions, Labor and all the other capitalist parties, Phillips said. “It is not a question of pressuring these organisations to do the right thing. What has become clear in every situation, whether it is COVID or the restructuring, the working class must begin to fight completely independently.”



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