

Australian tertiary education union facilitates “spill and fill” offensive at Macquarie University

Chris Gordon
27 August 2021

On top of more than 300 job losses at Sydney’s Macquarie University in 2020, the management has used a brutal “Hunger Games”-style operation to cut several dozen more positions this year, forcing educators to compete against each other for survival.

The precise number of positions eliminated remains deliberately clouded. Individuals are being encouraged to take “voluntary redundancies,” which reduces the number of officially reported forced redundancies.

This operation has been allowed to occur by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU). It has opposed any unified struggle against the cuts at Macquarie and the deepening destruction of jobs, conditions and courses across the country as the federal government and the university managements exploit the COVID-19 pandemic to accelerate the corporate “reinvention” of universities.

A recent letter from the NTEU’s Macquarie branch to Bruce Dowton, the university’s president and vice chancellor, typifies the union’s role.

In response to the massive job cuts—approximately 10 percent of staff and rising—and the increased workloads, tension and anxiety among the remaining staff, the union’s appeals to management can be explained only by an underlying agreement with the plans being implemented at the behest of the Morrison government and big business.

There is no demand that the redundancies be reversed. Rather, it is “requested” that redundant staff have access to the information leading to the decision to cut their position, so that the “process” can be “transparent.”

Given that the entire “spill and fill” operation was conducted within the framework of the “change

process” set out in the NTEU’s enterprise agreement with management, this plea amounts to a virtual guarantee that no positions, or only a tiny number, will be reinstated.

The “request” to Dowton for information about decision-making process serves another purpose, namely to atomise workers, and cut off a broader demand for the protection of all jobs.

Universities are being restructured. The pandemic is being used to implement long-standing plans, further aligning education with the interests of the corporate ruling class, as revealed in a recent report on Australian universities by the EY global consulting firm, proclaiming the “death” of higher education.

This framework accepts the many billions of dollars that have been cut in university funding by both Labor and Coalition governments since the last Labor government’s “education revolution” was imposed with the NTEU’s blessing a decade ago. The NTEU agrees that universities need to be “internationally competitive,” so “costs” must be lowered and courses transformed to satisfy the needs of employers and potential corporate research funders. The union’s only objection is that it needs “access to the books” to confirm the “budget crisis” and propose more “sustainable” ways to slash spending.

Likewise, the NTEU’s letter asks Dowton what market research has been conducted among school students relating to the curriculum changes. The union suggests there has been “inadequate business planning.” In other words, the university must satisfy the demands of business.

At the same time, the NTEU cannot remain completely silent in the face of this onslaught, for fear

of being entirely discredited even among the staff who are still members of the union. Some pretence of concern must be maintained.

Hence the union's letter to Dowton asked what child care services are being provided to staff with children engaged in online schooling during the current lockdowns, what leave arrangements are being made for vaccinations, and what financial support is being offered to staff working from home.

Such concerns, while legitimate, avoid the elephant in the room: the massive job cuts. An NTEU media release following the announcement of the spill and fill redundancies said the university was playing "musical chairs" with jobs. That seeks to cover over the actual job destruction.

The media statement concluded with Macquarie NTEU president Nikki Balnave stating: "It is a sin that they [staff and students] should pay for the mistakes of management and the ignorance of the Federal Government."

The restructuring at universities is not the result of "mistakes" or "ignorance" of the government, but rather a highly conscious operation. The government's "job ready graduates" funding legislation and virtual doubling of student fees in the humanities was in line with the relentless aligning of universities with business interests. In the government's own words, the intent is to "incentivise students to make more job-relevant choices."

The union's complicity stands in stark contrast to the determined fight and petition taken up by a student-led organisation, the Macquarie University Mathematics Society, to demand the reinstatement of mathematics educator Frank Valckenborgh, and the way in which that stand was backed and broadened by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE).

The IYSSE and CFPE, both sponsored by the Socialist Equality Party, successfully fought for support at other universities, and linked the campaign to similar student-initiated struggles, such as at La Trobe, Monash, Adelaide and the University of Western Australia, which signalled a striving by students to mount a counter-offensive.

The fact that the Macquarie management offered a new post to Valckenborgh revealed its fear of a united

movement of staff and students. This experience shows that in order to fight the assault on public education, new organisations are needed—a network of rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions.

Rank-and-file committees would reject the entire framework of enterprise agreements, and establish a common cause among university workers, students and all those in schools and childcare. They would insist on safe working environments, and demand full funding to provide a first-class education to all. Such a perspective would win the support of wide sections of workers.

Rank-and-file committees would link up with students, educators and all workers internationally who are facing similar critical struggles against the impact of the worsening global crisis, and discuss the necessity for an opposed socialist perspective.

To discuss the formation of rank-and-file committees, we urge educators and students to contact the CFPE.

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation/

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Twitter: twitter.com/CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact