

Union betrayals open way for more “spill and fill” job cuts at Australia’s Macquarie University

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Ruthless “spill and fill” restructuring operations by employers were unheard of in Australia before the corporate-government offensive launched through the COVID-19 disaster. But they are now being taken to a new level at Sydney’s Macquarie University, setting a precedent for wider use throughout the working class.

Macquarie’s management last week unveiled the latest round of its “Professional Services Transformation” program. By seeking to eliminate 310 full-time equivalent positions across the university, it is deepening the attack in its initial wave of academic staff cuts over the past year.

Once again, but on an even broader scale, university workers are being ordered to compete against each other for a much smaller number of jobs, with many positions also downgraded. Professional staff, who work alongside academics to support students, must “express interest” in new roles.

Management is restructuring approximately 25 percent of its professional staff workforce, and cutting pay levels, mounting what is believed to be the biggest assault on jobs in the university’s 57-year history.

The latest job cuts are in addition to the 239 professional and over 150 academic staff jobs known to have been eliminated at Macquarie since the start of the pandemic. The result will be even heavier workloads for the surviving staff, both professional and academic, and the loss of services and support for students.

These figures are likely to be an understatement. According to the university’s 2020 annual report, its full-time equivalent jobs dropped by 529 in that year alone. The teacher-student ratio also rose to 1:65, far worse than an internationally accepted optimum ratio of 1:20. The resulting large classes provide little pedagogical value.

All these job cuts are being executed, as at other

universities, through “change proposals” that are permitted under existing enterprise agreements struck by the trade unions with the employers.

In response, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) issued a media release last week saying it was “stepping into campaign mode” and allocating “serious resources” to fight the changes. But the promised “campaign” consists only of a public relations operation to “reach out” to the media, prospective students and “community leaders.”

The reality is that none of this devastating assault would be possible except for the role of the unions, which have acceded to the pro-business restructuring and suppressed the outrage and opposition of staff and students, both at Macquarie and throughout the public universities across the country.

Over the past 18 months, at least 40,000 and up to 90,000 jobs have been destroyed in the universities, counting the axing of casual and fixed-term contract workers, while the university unions—the NTEU and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU)—have blocked calls for strikes and opposed any unified national industrial and political campaign.

The stage was set for this restructuring tsunami when the NTEU joined hands with the employers in March 2020 to try to impose on its members the now notorious “Jobs Protection Framework” that accepted the loss of up to 18,000 jobs and proposed pay cuts of up to 15 percent.

When the resulting anger of university workers caused most employers to pull out of the deal, fearing that the NTEU could not enforce it, the union proceeded to strike similar pacts with individual university managements. The union pushed these agreements through branch membership meetings by declaring that staff would face massive fines if they took industrial action.

At Macquarie itself, as the previous “spill and fill” round hit academics, the NTEU wrote a grovelling letter to Bruce Dowton, the university’s president and vice chancellor, “requesting” that targeted staff members have access to the information leading to the decision to cut their position, so the “process” could be “transparent.”

The letter made no demand that the redundancies be reversed. Instead, it effectively facilitated the cuts by reducing the issue to one of individuals, many of whom were pressured into accepting supposed “voluntary redundancies” as a means of heading off and stifling collective opposition.

Such union appeals to management can be explained only by a fundamental agreement with the restructuring plans being implemented at the behest of big business and the Liberal-National Coalition government.

The NTEU agrees that universities need to be “internationally competitive.” That means courses must be 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.

The onslaught at Macquarie is part of a wider corporate offensive. Last month, for example, Deakin University, which has campuses across Melbourne, Geelong and Warrnambool, announced “a major organisational change,” branded “Deakin Reimagined.” It aims to produce a “post-pandemic university,” at the immediate expense of 200 more jobs, on top of the 350 eliminated during the first year of the pandemic.

At the University of Sydney, there was shock at an NTEU branch meeting last month when branch officials said management had proposed a “scorched earth” policy that would focus on teaching that “brings in the dollars,” while only certain “stars” would do research.

As the WSWS has warned from the outset, the pandemic is being exploited to accelerate the alignment of education with the interests of the corporate ruling class. In July, a report by the EY global consulting firm proclaimed the “death” of higher education. It demanded that universities in their current form be replaced by corporate vocational and research services.

Soon after the release of the EY report, the Labor Party’s shadow education minister Tanya Plibersek gave a speech that dovetailed with it. Addressing an *Australian Financial Review* gathering, she presented a Labor government as the best means of working with the managements and unions to produce “a university system

designed to underpin job creation, productivity and our national prosperity.”

Plibersek was a senior minister in the last Greens-backed Labor government from 2007 to 2013, which cut billions of dollars from university funding. That was after Labor imposed a market-driven “education revolution,” with the NTEU’s blessing, which compelled universities to compete with each other for enrolments, particularly in business-oriented courses, in order to survive financially.

These bitter experiences with Labor and the unions demonstrate that in order to fight the corporate-government assault on public education, new organisations are needed—rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions—guided by an opposed perspective that rejects the dictates of the financial markets and super-rich.

These committees would link up, through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, with workers worldwide, who are facing similar critical struggles, and discuss the necessity for a socialist perspective: one that fights for the complete reorganisation of society in the interests of all, not the soaring wealth accumulation of the billionaires.

To discuss the formation of rank-and-file committees, we urge educators and students to contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), both sponsored by the Socialist Equality Party.

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To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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