

Australia's Macquarie University deepens job cuts, aided by the union

Our reporters
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Just a week before Christmas, management at Macquarie University in Sydney announced the restructuring of support for research, making up to 24 staff redundant.

This change proposal is part of a broader attack on professional staff, with the university's Professional Services Transformation (PST) abolishing a further 310 positions, on top of the 350 staff members made redundant since early 2020.

These job losses are causing a significant worsening of working conditions at the university, which were already increasingly intolerable.

The job cuts have involved “spill and fill” operations, forcing workers to compete with each other for remaining positions. Such demands by university employers were unheard of in Australia before the corporate-government offensive launched during the COVID-19 disaster.

Every change and redundancy has been implemented within the framework of the enterprise agreement (EA), agreed to and enforced by the National Education Tertiary Union (NTEU). The NTEU's refusal to fight the previous cuts has opened the door for further such moves.

In an email to members about the latest change proposal, the NTEU said the timing of the change, on top of the PST, was a sign that management lacked “wisdom.” In fact, the Research Services change proposal has been in development since June 2021, and is part of the accelerated restructuring of Macquarie University, with management exploiting the impact of the pandemic.

The NTEU's reaction is similar to its response to the PST proposals, which it said “espouse many principles that may be laudable or credible in the right circumstances.” That is, the NTEU agrees with the

cutting of costs. The union's main request is that management should be “transparent” in providing “detailed workload analysis” to justify staff cuts.

In an October 27 response to management on the PST, far from rejecting the entire framework, and insisting on the reinstatement of sacked staff, the NTEU advised management that job losses be pursued via voluntary redundancies to “mitigate” forced redundancies.

That plea was made in order to stifle opposition by disguising the cuts as “voluntary” departures. The NTEU emphasised its desire to work with management to achieve the cost-cutting requirements. The union stated that “we are nonetheless prepared to work constructively with University management throughout the implementation phases of this restructure.”

This epitomises the NTEU's role across the country. Since the pandemic began, at least 40,000 and as many as 90,000 jobs have been destroyed at 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.

For decades, the NTEU has facilitated “efficiencies” and pro-business restructuring through EAs that are negotiated every three years.

The current EA at Macquarie University expired on December 31 and preparations to negotiate a new agreement are underway. The NTEU is again falsely advancing a new EA as the means to achieve better pay and conditions.

In reality, when the union's log of claims was presented to a members' meeting in November it included meaningless phrases, such as to “limit” workload intensification and provide “protections”

against unpaid overtime. It also said an employee should be subject to only one change proposal over the three-year life of the agreement. That would still allow for further ruthless restructuring.

The log of claims would also permit the continued unlimited use of casuals, just calling on management to “minimise” casual employment.

Socialist Equality Party members spoke at the meeting, opposing the log of claims and putting forward a perspective to fight the PST and reinstate the 350 staff made redundant since March 2020.

They moved a resolution that rejected the PST in its entirety and opposed the management-union “enterprise bargaining” process as a decades-old vehicle for imposing further pro-business restructuring and cuts to jobs and conditions.

The resolution called for a unified struggle by university staff and students against the offensive by governments and managements to accelerate the transformation of universities into increasingly casualised businesses, servicing the narrow vocational and research requirements of the corporate elite, at the expense of genuine education.

It demanded that, instead of big business being bailed out with billions of dollars, and billions more being handed to the military to prepare for war, resources be poured into healthcare and education funding, to protect the population from COVID-19 and guarantee the basic social right to free, first-class education for all students, including international students, and secure jobs for all university workers.

The motion concluded by calling for the establishment of rank-and-file action committees of tertiary education workers and students—independent of the NTEU, governments and employers—to link up with workers internationally who are facing similar critical struggles.

Several participants in the meeting agreed with the basic points of the resolution or said they were sympathetic. But the NTEU representatives refused to put the motion to the meeting, on the grounds that it was counterposed to the log of claims.

The perspective outlined in the motion has been vindicated since that meeting, during which time the NTEU has done nothing to oppose the PST, the research change proposal or management’s plans to return to face-to-face classes despite the record

numbers of infections occurring in the Omicron surge.

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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