

Australia: Union faces opposition at Macquarie University staff meeting

Our correspondents

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At a meeting of National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members at Sydney's Macquarie University last week, union representatives met opposition as they sought to stifle a genuine fight against ongoing real pay cuts, casualisation and oppressive workloads.

The events at the meeting are a further warning that the NTEU is intent on striking a sellout deal with management as quickly as possible, as the union has already done at several other universities, including the University of Sydney.

Despite NTEU members having just voted in a ballot by 97 percent for industrial action and 77 percent for indefinite stoppages, union officials pushed through a motion confining members to three minimal actions: 1) Making statements explaining why NTEU members are taking industrial action 2) A ban on working outside usual hours of work 3) Calling a stopwork meeting at the end of May.

Without any industrial action even commencing, the NTEU indicated its readiness to negotiate a deal. NTEU branch president Nicholas Harrigan told the meeting that "management positions have softened."

In order to proceed with its backroom talks with management, the union anxiously prevented debate on a resolution by members of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators' rank-and-file network, calling for the formation of a rank-and-file committee to take forward the fight at Macquarie and a broader struggle based on the development of demands to meet the needs of workers and students, not corporate restructuring.

The resolution proposed a series of demands, including pay rises in excess of inflation to catch up on past losses, the restoration of all jobs eliminated since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the right of all casualised university workers to secure employment, the elimination of intolerable workloads and "free first-class education for all students, instead of the government pouring billions of dollars into preparations for more US-led wars."

The CFPE resolution advanced a crucial alternative to the role of the university unions, the NTEU and Community and

Public Sector Union (CPSU), in isolating workers, university-by-university, and reaching retrograde deals. It said a rank-and-file committee would make calls and send delegations "appealing to all university staff and students at Macquarie and across the country to join the struggle."

Carolyn Kennett, a CFPE member, moved a procedural motion at the start of the meeting to ensure that all motions and amendments submitted, including the CFPE resolution, were debated. The motion sought to restrict the NTEU's report back on its bargaining talks with management to 15 minutes, with 15 minutes for questions, so that half the brief one-hour meeting remained for "all of the resolutions and amendments" to be discussed.

But the NTEU officers opposed this very basic democratic call and pushed through a vote against it, by about 43 votes to 19, with many abstentions.

Harrigan also arbitrarily ruled that the CFPE's substantive resolution be classified as a "counter-motion," so that it would not be debated at all if the official motion was carried.

Nevertheless, Kennett later spoke against the NTEU motion to confine the industrial action. "Staff have shown that they are willing to fight," she said. "Proposing a two-hour work stoppage is aimed at diluting the struggle and demoralising staff. 77 percent of members voted for indefinite strike action. This is reflected across the sector."

She said the union was trying to prevent discussion on the CFPE resolution that "outlines measures in order to take forward the struggle. We are fighting for militant action and a counter offensive... [W]e need a unified struggle: NTEU, CPSU, non-union members, students, academics and workers from other universities..."

"This is what rank-and-file committees are for. One aspect of a rank-and-file committees is having full and open discussion. Members have democratic rights to hear and discuss motions that are put to the meeting by members."

Kennett added: "The willingness of staff to fight is an international process. Universities and college workers in the US, UK and Nigeria, just to name a few, are taking action

against intolerable workloads and pay rises that are below inflation.”

She warned: “The NTEU is setting us up for a sellout. The pay deal that was reached at Sydney University is terrible. And just like at Sydney, we are being set up. That also happened at WSU [Western Sydney University]. What is needed are rank-and-file committees, where open democratic discussion can happen and workers can work across the sector and more broadly to carry forward the struggle.”

There was applause for these comments, reflecting the desire of many educators to widen the struggle and fight for the interests of all staff and students.

An opposing amendment to the NTEU motion, calling for a 24-hour strike, was narrowly defeated by about 55 to 45. The amendment, however, sought to keep workers trapped within the confines of the enterprise bargaining process at individual universities, and give management a slightly greater push to reach a deal.

Chris Gordon, another CFPE member, raised the need to broaden the struggle. “I support fighting for staff conditions and pay,” he said. “I support industrial action. But isolated action will lead to defeat. Look at what has happened at Sydney University ... there were nine days of strike action, but a complete sellout is being prepared by the NTEU because the struggle was isolated.”

An NTEU industrial officer, Josh Andrews, openly opposed any fight for pay rises to match inflation, which is officially running at 7 percent. He sought to use the sellouts imposed by the NTEU at other universities as a battering ram. “No university has won an inflation-level pay rise,” he declared. “Sydney couldn’t win with 8-9 days of strike action. We need to be upfront.”

In its talks with management at Macquarie, the NTEU is claiming to try to limit job-destroying change proposals by requiring management to state what work will be done, and by whom, after a restructuring. This waters down even a previous NTEU proposal that each staff member be subject to only one change proposal during the life of the three-year enterprise agreement, which would still allow staff members to be retrenched. The new proposal imposes no constraint on restructuring whatsoever.

The NTEU is also claiming to improve security of employment by granting permanence to fixed-term staff after two years of continuous employment and giving 100 casual employees permanence over the three-year agreement. Even if management agreed to this, it would not help the vast majority of the 70 percent of staff who lack security of employment.

At Macquarie, at least 350 full-time jobs were eliminated in 2020?21, as part of an avalanche of job destruction nationally, after the NTEU shocked and angered

university workers by volunteering to assist the managements to axe 18,000 jobs nationally and cut wages by 15 percent.

The NTEU-management “Job Protection Framework” collapsed in the face of a rank-and-file rebellion, but the NTEU and the CPSU pushed through cuts to jobs and conditions via deals with individual managements, further discrediting themselves in the process, leading to declining memberships.

Now the Albanese Labor government, whose election the unions supported, is deepening the decades-long funding cuts to universities. Last week’s federal budget cut higher education expenditure further by about 4 percent in real terms, while pouring hundreds of billions into military spending and income tax cuts for the wealthy.

The CFPE has warned that the NTEU is preparing another defeat at Macquarie. Last week’s meeting confirmed that. The only way to prevent a sellout is for Macquarie staff and students to take the struggle into their own hands and turn out to educators and workers in Australia and internationally.

That means forming a rank-and-file committee of staff and students, independent of the unions, to make the struggle at Macquarie a first step in developing a mass movement against the whole program of “sacrifice” and war preparations being implemented by the Labor government and other capitalist governments around the world.

This committee, and others nationally, would link up to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to unite workers, including education workers, globally in the struggle against the bankrupt capitalist profit system. To discuss how to form rank-and-file committees, and obtain help to do so, contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [@CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)



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