

Form a rank-and-file committee to prevent a sellout and take forward the fight at Sydney's Macquarie University

Committee for Public Education
29 May 2023

At the May 31 National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) stopwork meeting at Sydney's Macquarie University, the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators' network, will move a resolution calling for the formation of a rank-and-file committee.

This motion is essential to take forward the fight at Macquarie and for a broader struggle across all universities, and throughout the working class, against real wage cuts, casualisation and intolerable conditions.

Similar disputes are underway throughout the country, including in the Victorian and Queensland universities. As it has done for years, however, the NTEU is trying to isolate the struggle at each university, blocking a unified fight.

Macquarie workers are even being kept separated from their colleagues across town at the University of Sydney (USyd). We call for a united fight with the staff at USyd, where the CFPE is fighting for a "no" vote on any ballot on the NTEU's still-to-be-finalised rotten deal with management, and at the University of Newcastle, where there is a 24-hour strike on Thursday.

To prevent a wider movement, the NTEU and the other main campus union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), are trying to finalise retrograde deals with managements as rapidly as possible.

Left in the hands of the NTEU and its Macquarie branch committee, there will be another sell-out deal with management, just like the one being pushed by the NTEU national leadership at USyd, which inflicts a sub-inflation pay agreement and provides no guarantee of permanency for casuals.

Instead, the dispute at Macquarie can and must become part of a wider counter-offensive by educators and other workers. That includes the public health workers taking

action in New South Wales on May 31 against the state Labor government's below-inflation pay "rise" for public sector workers.

In the first week of May, NTEU members at Macquarie voted overwhelmingly—by 97 percent—for industrial action to fight for better pay and conditions and job security. There was powerful support (94 percent) for strikes of up to 24 hours and (77 percent) for indefinite stoppages.

That vote is another indication of the discontent, and willingness to fight, among all workers over the ongoing assault on their jobs and conditions, which has intensified since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

However, the NTEU is seeking to limit the industrial action at Macquarie as much as possible and keep it confined to an individual university.

A gross betrayal is being prepared. At a May 17 NTEU members' meeting at Macquarie, NTEU industrial officer Josh Andrews openly opposed any fight for pay rises to match inflation. "No university has won an inflation-level pay rise," he declared.

What the NTEU leadership regards as "a fair pay rise" can be judged by the 14.75 percent nominal "increase" over three years at the University of Technology Sydney, or less than 5 percent per annum. Like the NTEU deals struck at other universities, this amounts to a further real wage cut. The Australian Bureau of Statistics cost-of-living index for workers hit 9.6 percent this month.

Likewise, the NTEU is promising to try to limit change proposals by just requiring management to state what work will be done, and by whom, after a restructuring. This imposes no real constraint on job destruction.

The NTEU is also only seeking permanence for fixed-term staff after two years of continuous employment, and permanence for 100 casual employees over the three-year agreement. This 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, in which between 40,000 and 90,000 jobs were lost. That was 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.

After a year of the Albanese Labor government, discontent is growing. The May 9 federal budget cut higher education expenditure by about 4 percent in real terms, on top of some \$10 billion in cuts dating back to the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013.

By contrast, hundreds of billions are being poured into AUKUS submarines and other military spending to prepare for a US-led war against China, and into “stage three” tax cuts for the wealthy.

At the May 17 Macquarie NTEU members’ meeting, confronted by opposition to their sell-out plans, the NTEU representatives nervously prevented debate on an alternative CFPE resolution. Branch president Nick Harrigan even opposed our procedural motion, which sought to defend members’ democratic rights by ensuring that enough time was set aside to discuss all motions proposed by members.

At the May 31 stopwork meeting, we will again move that adequate time must be given to discuss members’ motions, including the following CFPE resolution:

This meeting calls for the formation of a rank-and-file committee to take forward the fight at Macquarie University for decent pay, conditions and job security, and for a broader struggle based on the development of demands to meet the needs of workers and students, not corporate restructuring.

Such demands should include:

- * **Annual pay rises, well in excess of inflation to ensure that workers do not go backward, and to catch up on past losses**

- * **Restoration of all jobs eliminated, including from 2020 to 2022**

- * **Elimination of intolerable workloads that make genuine research or professional development impossible**

- * **The right of all casualised university workers, many of whom have eked out an insecure existence for years, to secure and permanent employment if they want it**

- * **Protection from the COVID pandemic, including safe, ventilated facilities and the right to work from**

home

- * **Free first-class education for all students, instead of the government pouring billions of dollars into preparations for more US-led wars.**

On this basis, the rank-and-file committee would make calls and send delegations appealing to CPSU members and all university staff and students at Macquarie, University of Sydney and across the country, as well as the NSW health workers taking action today, for a joint struggle against real wage cuts, staff shortages and unbearable workloads.

Much broader issues are at stake. The unions are participating in the Labor government’s Universities Accord review, which seeks to further restructure the universities to meet the vocational and research demands of the corporate elite. The unions are also committed to assisting the government make university courses and research central to the war preparations involved in the AUKUS treaty.

To defeat another betrayal, Macquarie workers need to take their struggle into their own hands and turn out to educators and workers in NSW, Australia and internationally. That means forming a rank-and-file committee of staff and students, independent of the unions, to seek to develop a mass movement against the program of “sacrifice” and massive war spending being implemented by the Labor government.

This committee would link up to others in Australia and worldwide through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees in order to unite workers, including education workers, globally in this struggle. To discuss forming a rank-and-file committee contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

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



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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