

Australia: Macquarie University Rank-and-File committee members speak out

Our correspondents
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A casual lecturer and a student spoke to the WSWS to explain why they have helped launch a rank-and-file committee at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. Their names have been altered to avoid victimisation by the university management. To join the committee or to find out more, read the founding statement and fill out the form at the bottom of this article.

Jack is a casual lecturer who participated in the founding meeting of the rank-and-file committee at Macquarie University. He began by explaining the conditions under which he and other university casuals are working.

“I have been a casual worker at the university for more than eight years. Since 2019 I have pretty much worked a full-time load as a casual. There are no offers for full-time work for my current job or equivalent. Most of the other teachers I work with are casual workers.

“My contract means I have no job security. It is like casual schoolteachers. Within an hour if they tell you, ‘we don’t want you anymore,’ then I can be sacked, like that. While I don’t feel I’m going to lose my job without being told in advance, that’s not on paper. If they decide they don’t want to offer this unit anymore, I will be moved to another unit. Which means I need to start producing assessments from the beginning. That means more work.”

He went on to describe how the job changed over time. “Since I’ve become more senior, I have started to get more responsibilities, which at the beginning I welcomed because it makes you feel more appreciated in your job. However, as I moved forward the increase in responsibilities didn’t seem to stop, yet the pay never changed. I am on the same contract.

“In the beginning I was teaching a unit that had a

senior teacher, a position that I don’t see anymore. They got paid more, but also had the responsibility to create assessment tasks and do a bit of the admin work together with the admin staff. Then there were the classroom teachers, which I was, who were face to face with the students and taught the content prepared by the senior teachers.

“This was the case for larger units, but as I moved forward, I would teach smaller and smaller units and there would be no senior teachers. In these units I must do the actual teaching, but also the behind-the-scenes work. I need to create the assessment tasks and then mark them. It is all on me, with nobody else to help. I don’t think it is right for this work to be on one person, with that size class and getting paid the same.”

In discussing why he joined and helped establish the rank-and-file committee at Macquarie, Jack said it was following the May 31 stop work meeting called by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) at the university, which he had not been informed of beforehand.

He opposed the way that NTEU officials blocked Carolyn Kennett, a well-known member of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators’ network, from speaking at the stop work meeting.

“I barely managed to get to the stop work meeting on time. I heard about the silencing of Carolyn. That was one aspect on why I joined the rank-and-file committee. Another reason was agreement with many of the views discussed at the rank-and-file committee meeting.

“What we are demanding in the committee, I agree with. Starting from the right for casuals to be offered a secure permanent position, the right for students to have really high-quality free education through having their academics earning good wages and not having to

worry about their pay, employment status or inflation.

“What is also really important is the fight for the organisation of unified action, with the rank-and-file committee establishing the free flow of information, a channel where everyone can hear what is happening around them. Sometimes, even within one department inside the university, you don’t get to hear what’s happening in the department next to you.”

Susan is a member of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) club at Macquarie, as well as of the rank-and-file committee. She too opposed the NTEU’s blocking of Kennett at the stop work meeting.

“It was quite anti-democratic when Carolyn wasn’t allowed to speak,” Susan commented. “I assume that was because they oppose the resolution proposed by the CFPE.”

[That resolution called for the formation of a rank-and-file committee at Macquarie to fight an NTEU sellout of the enterprise agreement dispute and to organise a broader struggle against pay-cutting, casualisation and intolerable workloads with other educators and workers across Australia and internationally.]

Referring to the NTEU and the other main campus trade union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), Susan said: “I don’t know too much about the unions but I am aware that they are isolating the different universities, and the staff and students at those universities... A lot of people at the stop work meeting did not know that on the same day people at the University of New South Wales were having a stoppage.”

Susan said it was “definitely important” that one of the main points in the founding statement of the Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee was to reach out to, and unite with, workers and students at other universities.

She said Macquarie NTEU members had voted overwhelmingly for industrial action, with 77 percent voting for indefinite strikes, to fight against the management’s proposals for a real pay cut and continued casualisation and restructuring, but the NTEU had confined the action to a two-hour stop work meeting.

Susan supported the rank-and-file committee’s demand for “free first-class education for all students

instead of channelling billions of dollars into preparations for US-led wars.” She said: “I think that’s a real demand, and I think that’s something that any staff member would support. They want their students to have the best resources and the best education. And obviously those resources need funding, instead of putting that money toward wars and the military... That’s definitely an important thing to put into the resolution.”

Susan said she had not realised that about 70 percent of staff at universities are casuals and do not have any ongoing secure employment. “To do a job with such a high workload and not have the security of being permanent full-time or permanent part-time, that’s just wrong, because they do so much for their students and at the end of the day, they don’t know if they’ll still be able to earn a living after their contract ends...”

“It also affects the students as well. If they have a teacher that will help them, then they won’t see that teacher in the next semester... It makes it harder for staff and students.”

Susan wanted to draw attention to the refusal of the Macquarie University management to reaffiliate the IYSSE club, despite it reaching all the requirements for registration. She said the NTEU’s censorship of Kennett and the CFPE was similar to the management’s censorship of the IYSSE.

“It’s definitely, very much interlinked. Macquarie’s management is just pushing its anti-democracy, especially when a lot of the people we talk to, genuinely do want to listen to what the IYSSE perspective is.”

To join the committee, or discuss forming a rank-and-file committee, contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators’ network:

Email: cfpe_au@gmail.com

Facebook: [facebook.com/commforpubliceducation](https://www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation)

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