

Macquarie University workers in Sydney, Australia form rank-and-file committee

Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee
19 June 2023

The following is the founding statement of a rank-and-file committee established by workers and students at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. The World Socialist Web Site has also published today comments from two founding members. To join the committee or to find out more, fill out the form at the bottom of this article.

We are academics, university workers and students at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. We are convinced that we must build new organisations to fight deepening management attacks, as well as the repeated betrayals by the trade unions that claim to speak in our name.

That is why we have formed an independent rank-and-file committee at Macquarie University—to stop another union sellout at Macquarie and fight for a broader struggle against the real pay cutting, casualisation and corporate restructuring taking place across Australia's public universities.

We have watched the quality of education and the working conditions of university staff rapidly deteriorate as federal governments, both Labor and Liberal alike, have instituted funding cuts year after year.

These funding cuts have forced universities to adopt a market approach to education and research. Significant changes have happened in universities due to the dictates of corporations and finance. Instead of institutions that provide a public benefit, as centres of democratic and scholarly inquiry and exchange of ideas, universities have been transformed into profit-generating corporations. This transformation has led to the commercialisation of research and a significant narrowing of the curriculum.

What is now taught in universities is largely dictated by finance capital and corporate need. Most research

has become more closely aligned to the needs of business and the military, driven by funding imperatives. The ideal of academic freedom to explore ideas of interest has been replaced by the need to attract funding for work that can be commercialised or militarised.

The two unions representing staff at Australian universities, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), have likewise degenerated to become merely arms of management enforcing agreement after agreement that continue to deepen the assault on the conditions, workloads and pay of workers at universities.

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 decades of betrayals by the unions, we have concluded that we need to form a rank-and-file committee in order to take forward the struggle for the rights of workers to safe and secure jobs, manageable workloads and decent pay. We also believe that such a committee is necessary to fight for high quality public education.

With this committee, rank-and-file workers can take the struggle into their own hands, democratically formulate demands and work together to organise the necessary actions. The democratic nature of this committee is fundamental. Workers have the right to discuss what is needed and how that can be achieved.

The unions have demonstrated that they are neither democratic nor willing to fight for the conditions of

staff. They have blocked our calls for united action and isolated staff at individual universities and forced through regressive agreements that do not meet the needs of staff or students.

In building this committee we will reach out to other universities in Sydney and more broadly in Australia. All university staff are facing the same fundamental battles, so we should be united in our struggle. The conditions of workers at universities impact on the quality of learning for students, so this committee will welcome students as they also have the right to be involved in the fight for their education.

Staff have shown that they are willing to fight. Ballots for industrial action have garnered massive support from staff. At university after university, staff have instituted work bans, attended stop work meetings and taken strike action. But agreements that have been forced through in the past 12 months have pay “rises” well below inflation, no limits on restructuring and job losses, and no guarantees for the majority of casual staff for a permanent position.

At Macquarie, like everywhere else, the NTEU has made clear that it will not seek any pay rise to match inflation in its current enterprise bargaining talks with management, claiming that to be unrealistic. Likewise, it is claiming to limit job-destroying measures (“change proposals”) by merely requiring management to state what work will be done and by whom after a restructuring. This is not opposition, but union facilitation and participation in job destruction.

Similarly, the NTEU’s proposal offers permanence only to fixed-term staff members after two years of continuous employment and to 100 casual employees throughout a three-year agreement, condemning most of the remaining 70 percent of staff to precarious and insecure job tenure.

The university sector has become highly casualised, with up to 70 percent of staff in casual roles. Some casuals have been in their roles for 10 or more years. The majority of teaching at universities is now done by casual tutors who can be sacked with an hour’s notice. In addition, many research positions are also short-term, and rely on external funding. The agreements that the unions have enforced have created a two-tier system where a few people have permanency and the rest are left to struggle on short-term and casual contracts.

University and college workers throughout the world

are facing similar attacks. The Macquarie University rank-and-file committee declares our solidarity with the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, dedicated to unifying the struggles of all workers internationally. It is not only university workers that are in this struggle but also factory workers, public service workers, health workers and all who sell their labour power in order to live. It is only by uniting that we can successfully win our demands. Our initial demands include:

- the reinstatement of all jobs eliminated by decades of funding cuts, including the thousands of jobs eliminated during the COVID-19 pandemic
- secure employment for all casualised university workers who want it
- pay increases surpassing inflation to compensate for past losses
- thousands of staff must be employed to guarantee that all university workers, both professional and academic, have reasonable workloads
- the right to conduct research that is not influenced by the profit demands of corporate interests, government interference or the demands of the military apparatus
- academic freedom to research, speak and write without management, government or corporate censorship
- free first-class education for all students instead of channelling billions of dollars into preparations for US-led wars

We appeal to all Macquarie University workers and students who agree with us to join our committee in order to unite with workers across the country and internationally.

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.aus@gmail.com

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

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



To contact the WWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)