

Australia: Sydney University sacks immune-compromised academic for insisting on COVID safety

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16 November 2023

Niko Tiliopoulos, a senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Sydney, was sacked on Monday, despite thousands of students and staff opposing his removal. Tiliopoulos was dismissed by email, with two hours' notice, after management refused to re-schedule a meeting with him.

Tiliopoulos has severe respiratory and autoimmune conditions, so he cannot risk catching COVID-19, which could be life-threatening. Two doctors, including one appointed by a university review panel, made that assessment of "substantial" risks to his health.

In response, management declared that Tiliopoulos was "unfit" to work because he refused to return to face-to-face work and teaching. That was despite him successfully teaching online since 2020 and receiving overwhelmingly positive reviews from students.

Unless Tiliopoulos's sacking is defeated, it will set a precedent that can be used throughout the tertiary education industry to victimise and sack educators who refuse, for critical health reasons, to adhere to the intensifying "return to campus" offensive by the employers, even as the pandemic resurges in Australia and many other countries.

Tiliopoulos has worked at the University of Sydney (USYD) for 16 years, but management rejected, without reason, alternative teaching arrangements. Instead, it stated: "Unfortunately, in some cases it is not possible for an employee with a disability to perform the inherent requirements of their position."

This position is manifestly false. The problem is not Tiliopoulos' proven capacity to teach with excellence, but management's insistence on a return to campus for commercial reasons, including to offer a campus "experience" to attract high-fee-paying international

students.

USYD announced that from July 1 this year, "classes will be delivered on campus for all students." It would "no longer offer remote units" except for "validated" units or degrees. One of the validated units was one that Tiliopoulos teaches, yet management initiated measures against Tiliopoulos in February.

A message from Vice-Chancellor Mark Scott asserted that "staff and supervisors recognise and value the importance of in-person connection, and acknowledge that attendance at campus is a requirement." In reality, universities have been reopened as part of the murderous "let it rip" policies of governments around the world. For the ruling capitalist elite, returning universities to face-to-face teaching has been part of a wider drive to push workers to go back to work to continue producing profits, regardless of the health risks.

The reopening of campuses has been an ongoing process since the beginning of 2022, with the full support of the two campus trade unions, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU). As early as November 2021, the NTEU proposed that "we transition out of lockdowns" and "transition forward."

In the current round of enterprise bargaining over the past year, the NTEU has pushed through at least 15 agreements at individual universities that contain no protections from the pandemic.

For example, in the agreement at USYD, clause 213 says the university "may" allow flexible work arrangements, of an unspecified nature, to staff members with a disability or significant chronic condition. The crucial word is "may." In refusing to

allow Tiliopoulos to conduct his teaching remotely, management has not formally breached the agreement.

Managements and union bureaucrats alike have justified the full return to campus for students and staff with the lie that the pandemic is over. In fact, the pandemic continues, but reporting has virtually ended. In the state of New South Wales, for example, NSW Health's November 4 health summary noted only that "COVID-19 activity is at moderate levels and increasing."

As the WSWS wrote in June: "Effectively, what has been established is a new and highly regressive public health doctrine, where the continuous mass circulation of a deadly virus is ignored and treated as a non-event."

The NTEU has a petition, "I stand with Niko," which presents an NTEU façade of fighting to protect Tiliopoulos's position. When the petition was presented to the vice-chancellor, it had been signed by more than 2,000 staff. The petition is entirely focussed on disability and makes no mention of the right for all staff to work remotely, disability or otherwise, during the pandemic.

Moreover, the petition is a plea to the very same forces, led by Scott, who have conducted the ousting of Tiliopoulos. It calls on Scott to uphold the university's Disability Inclusion Access Plan, intervene to protect Tiliopoulos's employment and meet with the Disability at Work Network and NTEU reps about remote work policies for staff with disabilities.

In the university's Disability Inclusion Action Plan (DIAP), Scott wrote in the foreword that the university must "provide a learning and working environment which is inclusive and accessible to all our students, staff and visitors." The sacking of Tiliopoulos is in direct breach of the DIAP, which may be legally enforceable, but management has chosen to flout it.

This has serious implications for all workers at USYD and other tertiary institutions. COVID and Long COVID pose a serious threat to health and lives, yet employers are insisting that staff must expose themselves to this peril.

Last October, the WSWS published a video interview with Dr Pippa Yeoman, an educational ethnographer and a senior lecturer at USYD, about her ongoing struggle with Long COVID. Yeoman, a member of the Long COVID Facebook community support group, voiced her concerns about the failure of Australian

governments to provide adequate support to Long COVID victims and the dangerous consequences for public health of the lifting of basic COVID safety measures.

Yet the NTEU has not announced any fight to overturn Tiliopoulos's dismissal. In an email to NTEU members at USYD on Tuesday, the union's branch president Nick Reimer gave no indication of any such fight. Instead, Reimer stated: "We will not forget this cruelty whenever management next claim to care about staff and their wellbeing."

Reimer reported that another academic, Professor Manuel Graeber, also had been sacked. Reimer said the union could not comment on any details of this termination, but noted that Graeber had made serious allegations of malfeasance against a number of the university's senior managers. Reimer concluded: "We will update members on both situations, including on what members can do in response, as soon as we are able."

Given the NTEU's record, university workers cannot trust the unions to organise any struggle to defeat the sacking of Tiliopoulos and the wider threat to health and safety. Rank-and-file committees have to be formed, independent of the unions, to lead this fight. To discuss forming such committees, contact the Committee for Public Education.

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