

Australian university staff and students confront job cuts avalanche

By Mike Head
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Australian university managements last week announced thousands more redundancies, including forced retrenchments. This poses the urgent necessity for a unified national struggle by university workers and students against the escalating assault on jobs and basic conditions.

Three universities alone—Melbourne’s RMIT University, the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and the Australian National University (ANU)—unveiled a total of nearly 2,900 job losses. That is on top of many thousands of jobs already eliminated by the public universities since March.

Across the country, as is happening globally, governments and university employers are demanding that staff and students pay the price for the disastrous response of the capitalist ruling elites to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has now surged to 31 million infections and nearly 1 million deaths.

The initial wave of job cuts for 2020 has become an avalanche for 2021 and beyond. After years of multi-billion dollar funding cuts by one government after another, the pandemic is being exploited to accelerate the pro-business gutting and restructuring of universities.

Never has the need for an all-out fight against this offensive been so great.

But the greatest barrier to this struggle are the university trade unions, which are doing everything they can to prevent a nationwide strike and instead isolate their members at individual universities, while intensifying their partnerships with the managements to facilitate the cuts.

At university after university, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is pleading with vice-chancellors to work more closely with the union to devise means of implementing cutbacks, even as the vice-chancellors sign up to the Liberal-National government’s latest funding cuts and student fee hikes.

RMIT University intends to shed some 1,200 staff, rather than the 355 “voluntary” redundancies it confirmed last month. That is 10 percent of the workforce. Another 345 forced redundancies are proposed and 500 to 600 casual and fixed-term staff will have no work next year.

The NTEU has responded by urging its members to sign a petition to ask the vice-chancellor to “meet and talk with us directly with regard to how the university has been affected by the COVID 19 crisis.”

After asking the vice-chancellor to “provide a real commitment to open governance and financial transparency,” the petition concludes by laying out the readiness of the union to help implement whatever sacrifices are required to keep the university afloat.

“It is our commitment to each other that will see RMIT through this current crisis,” the petition pleads.

The line-up is similar at the ANU, which is planning 215 retrenchments on top of a reported 250 so-called voluntary redundancies. Hundreds of casual and fixed-term staff have also had their contracts ended.

In an email to NTEU members, the union’s Australian Capital Territory division secretary Cathy Day called on management “to be open and transparent about all possible financial options including borrowing, revenue raising and non-salary savings.”

This is in the same vein as the NTEU’s “national framework” offer to the vice-chancellors at the beginning of the pandemic to impose wage cuts of up to 15 percent and still permit the destruction of 18,000 jobs. That offer had to be withdrawn in the face of hostility from university workers, but the NTEU has since only stepped up its efforts to strike similar agreements at individual universities.

UNSW’s declaration that over half of the almost 500 job cuts it flagged in July will be forced redundancies is likely to trigger deep opposition among university workers. So far, the union has made no public response.

Far from calling for unified action to fight the job loss tsunami, however, NTEU national president Alison Barnes merely told the media: “The NTEU cannot understand how the government can just sit idly watching thousands and thousands of jobs disappearing from higher education.”

Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government is not sitting idly by. Its “job ready graduates” plan dictates the further transformation of universities into vocational institutions serving the direct needs of big business, while doubling the fees for students in humanities and a range of other courses not considered relevant enough to those profit-driven requirements.

The government also has launched an anti-China witch-hunting inquiry into the universities, tying them into Washington’s military and economic confrontation with China.

The vice-chancellors to which the union is appealing for closer partnerships are now rushing to support the “jobs ready” plan, and urging senators to pass the bill, in the hope of securing a little extra cash in return.

Last week’s announcements take the job losses to a new level.

Already, Melbourne’s Monash University is pressing ahead with 277 “voluntary” redundancies, and Sydney’s Macquarie University has initiated a voluntary redundancy scheme aimed at jettisoning an unspecified number of positions. The University of Sydney had signalled job cuts of up to 30 percent in humanities.

Other full-time losses include up to 500 positions at the University of Technology Sydney, 450 at the University of Melbourne, up to 430 at La Trobe University, 300 at Deakin University, 200 at the University of New England and 100-plus at Charles Sturt University.

More than 200 jobs are to be eliminated at Western Sydney University, up to 200 at Perth’s Murdoch University and “hundreds” at Perth’s Curtin University. At each institution, this follows other cost-cutting attacks such as pay and hiring freezes and higher workload allocations.

Various pseudo-left groups in the NTEU are assisting the union to enforce the cuts. At north Queensland’s James Cook University, the union is formally opposing the deferral of a 2 percent salary increase due this month. That is because the NTEU is asking the management to consult with it to find other means of extracting “sacrifices” from its members.

Speaking to the media, the union’s JCU branch president, Jonathan Strauss, a member of the pseudo-left

Socialist Alliance, made this explicit. “Staff are willing to make sacrifices,” he said, “but they need to know that what is being asked of them is necessary and proportional. James Cook simply hasn’t been as badly affected by the loss of international students as CQU or some of the big metropolitan universities.”

This sums up the role of the union and its pseudo-left accessories in dividing workers and students at each university from one another. They are imposing the market-driven program of the supposed “education revolution” introduced by the last Greens-backed Labor government, which compels the public universities to compete with each other for financial survival.

At the same time, all the pseudo-left organisations, such as the Socialist Alternative’s NTEU Fightback, are urging university workers to join and “rebuild” the NTEU. Their perspective is to become the leaders of the NTEU itself, just like their now increasingly discredited predecessors, such as Barnes, who was once a member of the International Socialist Organisation, a forerunner of Socialist Alternative.

In order to reverse this historic assault, university workers and students have to break out of the political and industrial straitjacket of the NTEU and its pseudo-left accomplices. They need to form democratically elected rank-and-file committees of university workers and students, completely independent of the unions, to prosecute a unified industrial and political struggle against all the union-enforced cuts.

That means rejecting the dictates of the capitalist profit system and turning to a socialist perspective based on the total reorganisation of society in the interests of all, instead of the financial oligarchy.

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