

Educators and students discuss how to form rank-and-file committees at Australia's universities

Our correspondents
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At a forum hosted by the recently-formed Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee last Sunday, an important discussion developed on how to form rank-and-file committees to fight the ongoing union betrayals of university workers' struggles.

The forum was titled: "Reject the union sellout at Macquarie University! Unite with striking University of Melbourne workers!"

It was called to oppose the retrograde enterprise agreements that the management and the unions are seeking to impose at Macquarie University via an all-staff ballot this Tuesday and Wednesday, and discuss the need to unite with the University of Melbourne workers who held stoppages all last week to fight casualisation and pay-cutting.

The participants also voted for a resolution of support, published below, for victimised Sri Lankan plantation workers, who are being defended by the Plantation Action Committee in Sri Lanka, a fellow affiliate of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Opening the forum, Mike Head, an educator at Western Sydney University, a member of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE)—the educator's rank-and-file network—and WSWs correspondent, said a No vote at Macquarie would be a powerful first step toward a broader struggle across the sector. He said this was necessary to fight against the regressive deals being imposed at university after university by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), which cut real wages, allow mass casualisation to continue and facilitate further pro-business restructuring.

In her report to the forum, Carolyn Kennett, Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee and CFPE member, explained: "We are a group of academics, university workers and students who are convinced that we need to 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.

"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."

Kennett reviewed in some detail the sellout deals negotiated by the NTEU and CPSU at Macquarie, outlining the fine print that was exposed in a statement issued by the rank-and-file committee.

She summed up: "The proposed agreements do nothing to address the concerns of staff regarding workload intensification, excessive use of casual and insecure forms of employment and constant threats to jobs through restructuring and job destruction, and of course the increasing costs of living."

Kennett said the unions were deliberately isolating workers at Macquarie and other universities from their colleagues at the University of Melbourne, who held stoppages last week. Staff in five work areas there had struck for the entire week, fighting for better wages, conditions and against rampant casualisation. "These are the longest stoppages at the university in decades," she noted.

Kennett reported that NTEU representatives had blocked her from speaking at two members' meetings at Macquarie, stopping her from calling for a unified struggle across the entire tertiary education sector.

She said: "University workers, together with students, need to review these experiences and draw the necessary conclusions. It is impossible to defend public education without breaking out of the straitjacket of the NTEU and other unions, and the anti-strike enterprise bargaining laws they enforce."

Kennett outlined the initial demands advanced by the Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee, based on what workers need, not what is "realistic" according to the union bureaucrats, the corporate elite and their governments, including the Albanese Labor government.

These demands included pay increases surpassing inflation to compensate for past losses; the reinstatement of all jobs eliminated by decades of funding cuts and during the COVID-19 pandemic; and secure employment for all casualised university workers who want it.

Another crucial demand was the right to conduct teaching and research that is not dominated by the profit demands of corporate interests, government interference or the needs of the military apparatus.

Kennett said there had to be a unified struggle, reaching out to other workers in Australia and internationally, including at other universities, but also teachers and healthcare workers, for support and joint action. “For that we need rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the union apparatuses,” she concluded.

A student asked for an explanation of how to start a rank-and-file committee, triggering an important discussion and clarifications that involved Kennett and other members of the Macquarie committee and the CFPE.

Kennett explained that workers themselves formed committees, out of necessity, in order to fight the suppression by the trade union bureaucracies of the struggles against the deepening attacks of employers and governments. That step also required clarification of the need for such committees as the new genuine form of working-class organisation against the union apparatuses, which had been transformed into industrial police forces.

Kennett and Chris Gordon, another member of the Macquarie committee, also spoke on the development of demands by the committees to articulate and advance the interests of workers, not the dictates of management, governments and the corporate elite.

These committees had to be democratic, giving voice to workers and students, unlike the NTEU and other unions that suppressed discussion and dissent. Agreement with socialism was not necessary, but the committees fight for the independent interests of the working class against the ruling class and its political agencies.

CFPE national convenor Sue Phillips related some of the experiences of establishing rank-and-file committees in Australia and internationally, each emerging out of struggles, including against unsafe conditions in the continuing global COVID-19 pandemic.

Head spoke on the example of the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee in the United States, which developed out of a fight against a contract betrayal by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union bureaucracy. That became part of a wider developing rebellion against the UAW officialdom, which was given conscious expression by the campaign for the UAW presidency by Will Lehman, running as a rank-and-file socialist candidate and winning widespread support.

Head said the founding of the IWA-RFC provided an essential vehicle through which rank-and-file committees could organise and link up the struggles against the international corporate conglomerates and global capitalist order that they are fighting.

To underscore the worldwide character of the class struggle, the forum adopted the following resolution of support for the plantation workers in Sri Lanka who have been sacked and falsely accused of assault and damaging property for participating in a strike and protest in February 2021 demanding a 1,000-rupee (\$US2.75) daily wage.

“1. This meeting called by the Committee for Public Education and the Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee condemns the state frame-up of 49 plantation workers at the Alton, Velioya and Katukelle estates in Sri Lanka and demands all charges against them be dropped immediately and that all sacked workers be reinstated. They are being persecuted for fighting to improve the wages and working conditions of themselves and their fellow workers under conditions in which the plantation companies are attempting to make workers pay for the crisis in the tea industry. This crisis is a product of the capitalist system, which workers are not responsible for. As university workers, students and teachers we have decades of experience of being made to pay for a crisis that is not of our making, particularly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

“2. We endorse the campaign launched by the Plantation Action Committee in Sri Lanka (PACSL) to fight for the defence of these workers. PACSL is the only organisation that is fighting to defend the rights of plantation workers and indicates the way forward for workers everywhere who wish to fight.”

The forum also supported a call by International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) national convenor Evrim Yazgin to join an in-person and online public meeting at Macquarie University this Thursday to oppose the anti-democratic decision by the university management to block the affiliation of the IYSSE club on the campus.

If you agree with the need to build rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the union apparatuses, contact the CFPE to discuss how to do that:

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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