

Arts Faculty cuts at Australia's Macquarie University underscore Labor's pro-business restructuring agenda

A Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee member
1 October 2024

In the latest offensive against educators under the Albanese Labor government, the management at Sydney's Macquarie University is demanding massive cuts to casual employment of academics in the Arts Faculty, accompanied by course closures, from next year.

This move further demonstrates the damaging impact of the government's ongoing funding cuts, now compounded by its caps on international student enrolments, as well as its sham "closing loopholes" legislation that was purportedly designed to provide casual workers with some employment security.

Like our colleagues at Western Sydney University (WSU), where a rank-and-file committee is fighting the destruction of more than 10 percent of the jobs at WSU College, we are in a struggle against the Labor government's pro-business restructuring of universities.

It is no accident that arts and humanities programs, which are meant to encourage broader critical thinking about the state of the world, are first in the firing line nationally, including at Macquarie and WSU College, where such courses are being decimated.

In August, Macquarie's Faculty of Arts Dean Chris Dixon announced that from 2025 there will be a significant reduction in the number of casual staff, who currently number the equivalent of 97 full-time positions. This would deny work to many casual academics who have often worked for the university for years, with damaging flow-on effects for permanent staff and students.

Similar moves are underway throughout the university sector, where casual academic staff do much of the teaching and marking. Managements have responded to Labor's "loopholes" legislation by either preventing casuals from gaining any claim to permanency or ending their employment altogether.

At the Macquarie Arts Faculty, the slashing of casual employment is supposed to be made up by employing 10 Graduate Teaching Associates (GTAs) and offering 30 teaching-focused full time permanent roles over the next three years. This comes nowhere near to replacing the casuals.

The GTA jobs are a new form of cheap labour. They consist of a contract to teach for five years, while enrolled as a part-time doctoral student. At the end of the five-year contract, GTAs may be offered a six-month scholarship to complete their doctorate. Their teaching role is a half-time appointment, paid at the lowest rate for academic staff, working out at roughly \$38,000 per year. This is barely above the poverty line of \$32,000 for a single person.

Dixon also announced significant attacks on both students and permanent academics to meet the teaching shortfall.

For academic staff this includes a 10 percent increase in the percentage of workloads allocated to teaching, thereby cutting time for research. They would also be prevented from taking sabbatical and long service leave during teaching periods, making it almost impossible for many to take the leave.

Students would face course cuts, including the removal of many electives, and the reduction of assessments to one—probably an all-or-nothing final task—per unit. Such an assessment regime is the antithesis of good teaching and learning practice, where students have opportunities to grow and develop across a semester.

Staff at Macquarie University have been instructed to remove all references to "sessional academic staff," the name previously used for casual academics employed to teach for a semester/session.

This is part of a wider attack. Other universities are also slashing casual staff numbers and changing the wording

of their contracts to prevent them from applying for permanency under Labor's legislation.

At Monash University, for example, heads of academic departments have been told they would have only very minimal numbers of casual teaching staff from next year.

Centre for Future Work senior researcher Dr Lisa Heap told the *Guardian*: "Some universities are also giving casuals zero- hours contracts and suggesting that they may begin advising staff of any classes on a weekly basis to avoid creating an expectation of a 'firm advanced commitment' which would give staff an ability to convert to an ongoing contract."

For all their claims to oppose casualisation, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) leaders are complicit in this assault, having backed Labor's legislation as well as its broader pro-business agenda.

When the "loopholes" legislation was announced in February, the NTEU claimed it was a major win for workers. In a media release, NTEU general secretary Damien Cahill said: "With casualisation rampant across higher education, this bill clears some of the hurdles for staff to convert to permanent jobs."

At Macquarie University, NTEU meetings have been designed to channel members' anger into passing motions that contain no action, but instead appeal to management to rethink their decisions and meet with union officials for negotiations.

This is the modus operandi of the NTEU. As our rank-and-file committee warned last year, the enterprise agreements struck at Macquarie University and elsewhere "impose sub-inflationary pay deals, facilitate further pro-corporate restructuring and allow mass casualisation to continue. They also open the floodgates for new teaching-focused roles and greater exploitation of low-paid post-graduate instructors."

Since then, the Labor government has further deliberately tightened the financial pressure on universities after years of underfunding by successive governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, by cutting the numbers of international students, on whose exorbitant fees the universities have become reliant. Thousands of jobs across the sector, particularly those of casuals, are being destroyed as a result.

This pressure is seeking to compel universities to comply with the requirements of Labor's Universities Accord, which the NTEU also supports. The Accord links funding to mission statements tied to meet the government's national priorities.

These priorities feature partnering with the corporate

elite in developing courses and conducting research to satisfy their narrow employment and profit needs, and collaborating with the military and weapons conglomerates as part of the AUKUS military pact and other preparations for war.

The anti-foreigner policy directed against international students is also intended to help whip up a war-related atmosphere, with Chinese student enrolments being targeted in particular.

To take forward the fight at Macquarie, we must unite with our colleagues at WSU and other universities who face similar attacks. The NTEU has always been opposed to any such unified struggle. Instead, it enforces the anti-strike workplace laws that the trade union bureaucracy itself drafted with this and the last Labor government.

That is why we are urging the building of rank-and-file committees across the sector, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, to take matters out of the hands of the union apparatuses.

The rank-and-file committees at WSU and Macquarie, and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) recently hosted a forum titled: "Oppose Australian Labor government's cuts to international students and tertiary education jobs."

It called for a unified campaign by educators and students, and workers and youth more broadly, to fight the WSU College job destruction, the Albanese government's cuts to international student enrolments and the thousands of job cuts being triggered across the tertiary education sector.

It urged the formation of rank-and-file committees throughout the education system to defend jobs and conditions and oppose Labor's reactionary agenda of war, austerity and the corporatisation and militarisation of education.

If you agree with this call, please contact the Committee for Public Education, the educators' rank-and-file network, to discuss how to form rank-and-file committees and obtain help to do so:

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 WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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