

A new wave of job cuts at Australian universities

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As the academic year gets underway this month, students and staff at Australian public universities face deteriorating conditions. Starved of funds by one government after another, university managements are decimating full-time jobs, reducing face-to-face teaching and driving up class sizes.

Deep funding cuts imposed by the last Labor government have been compounded by multi-billion dollar cuts inflicted by the current Liberal-National administration. This is forcing universities into further restructuring as they desperately compete with each other to enrol students, particularly full fee-paying international students, and attract corporate investment.

Toward the end of last year, a new wave of job cuts began across the country, mainly via so-called voluntary redundancy or retirement programs that are used to get rid of targeted workers. These schemes have the full agreement of the two trade unions that cover university workers, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU). What follows is only a partial list:

- Last November, the Queensland University of Technology said it would “purge” about 90 “underperforming” staff “whose aspirations no longer align with those of the university” because they were “not bringing in enough money.” Employees would be offered up to a year’s salary to quit with the help of a retirement tax package.

- A week later, Curtin University in Western Australia confirmed 100 to 150 staff were expected to be axed for 2017. Blaming the former mining boom state’s economic slowdown, the management said it planned to allow fixed-term, casual and sessional staff contracts to expire in humanities to offset decreased research and contract income in the science, engineering and humanities faculties.

- Later in the month, the University of Newcastle unveiled an “organisational review” that would involve about 170 redundancies—some 10 percent of its full-time and casual workforce. It was the 15th review or restructure in three years for what the vice-chancellor called “a changing academic enterprise.”

- Meanwhile, Western Sydney University (WSU) unveiled a “voluntary early retirement” package, through which it ultimately secured the departure of more than 200 selected academics and administrative workers.

- In early December, leaked documents revealed that over 400 job cuts were being planned at the University of NSW in Sydney as part of a further revamping of the university’s business model. A document called UNSW Strategic Initiatives Operational Excellence Business Cases Summary, sent anonymously to the NTEU, outlined annual cuts of \$47.3 million, with severance pays calculated to reach \$30 million.

- Just days into 2017, the University of Canberra College (UCC), an offshoot of the university, released a restructure plan that would “disestablish” unspecified numbers of jobs, in order to be “adaptable” and deliver “world class quality outcomes.” The changes stem from the sale of 51 percent of UCC to private education provider Navitas in 2015. Since then, many cost-cutting measures have been implemented already, leading to redundancies, vacant positions remaining unfilled, and significant increases in workloads.

- This week, Victoria University in Melbourne confirmed it would eliminate 115 jobs throughout the year as it establishes its planned First Year College.

Over the previous three years hundreds of full-time jobs have been axed nationally with the assistance of the NTEU and CPSU. While sometimes making token protests, the unions have stifled resistance, often

securing deals with management to help impose marginally fewer retrenchments.

These cuts are escalating the casualisation of the workforce. According to the NTEU's own estimates, only 2 out of 10 recent new employees have been employed on a permanent basis. By the union's calculations, 63.8 percent of university staff are now working under insecure conditions. By 2015, 44.2 percent of contract research staff were employed on contracts of one year or less, and more than half the academics who taught undergraduate students were casuals.

This casualisation has serious impacts on the ability of teachers and other university workers—living from semester to semester and contract to contract—to survive financially, let alone plan for their futures. It also makes them highly vulnerable to demands for increased workloads and to acquiesce to the ongoing cuts and underlying transformation of universities into corporate institutions serving the needs of business and the political establishment.

Domestic and full-fee paying overseas students all face decreased availability of staff for consultation and guidance, combined with the replacement of lectures and tutorials by on-line presentations, and larger classes. Adding to these pressures is the soaring enrolment of international students, whom the systematically underfunded universities treat as cash cows.

According to recent official statistics, 712,884 international students were enrolled in Australian universities, vocational colleges, intensive English-language courses and schools in 2016, up by 11 percent from 2015 to a new record. Higher education enrolments rose by 12.9 percent to 306,691, making up more than a quarter of the students at some universities. Universities, private education companies and related operators raked in \$22 billion from these students in 2016, while slashing their workforces.

The complicity of the NTEU in these processes is typified by an email sent to its members at WSU on January 31, in which it reported that more than 200 jobs had been eliminated via the “voluntary” retirement scheme. It emphasised: “Just to remind and to clarify: the NTEU does not contest the right of WSU Management to restructure its workforce, so long as it follows the provisions of the Agreements. Effective

change management requires the contribution of frontline staff in decision-making.”

In other words, the union supports the job destruction. Its only demand is that the university executives consult with it, as specified by the unions' enterprise agreements, to ensure “effective change management.” For the past two decades, enterprise agreements have served as mechanisms to contain and suppress the opposition of university workers, with the unions continually “trading off” essential protections against job cuts and casualisation.

During 2017, a new round of enterprise bargaining will occur, with universities demanding the further elimination of job security and other basic conditions. At WSU, where the NTEU has previously agreed to new employees being placed on two-year probation periods, the administration wants to speed up procedures for sacking staff on grounds of misconduct, ill health, poor probation assessment or “unsatisfactory” performance. At Melbourne's Deakin University, the proposed agreement would increase academic teaching loads by up to 80 percent and require academic staff to teach every trimester. Melbourne University is demanding a “performance pay” regime for general staff.

While collaborating with university managements, the unions are stepping up their efforts to sow illusions that the return of a federal Labor government would reverse this downward spiral. In fact, it was the last Greens-backed Labor government of 2007 to 2013 that imposed the “education revolution,” laying the foundations for the intensifying assault on staff and students.



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