

Australia: National Tertiary Education Union attempts to suppress struggle against job cuts at Western Sydney University

Our correspondent
4 September 2017

The Western Sydney University (WSU) branch of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) convened a “forum” on August 31 to discuss the university’s latest job destruction. It provided a case study of how the trade unions systematically stifle and demoralise workers looking for a way to fight the mounting assault on jobs, conditions and basic rights.

Staff and students at WSU, one of Australia’s largest public universities, face a new wave of job losses driven by federal government funding cuts. An estimated 150 professional staff jobs will be axed under a “shared services” blueprint released by management on August 25. All the security staff will be retrenched as well.

These cuts will have a devastating impact, not only on the staff members who are squeezed out, retrenched or shunted into lower-paid positions. These workers provide the administrative support and assistance upon which entire departments, academics and students depend. The remaining staff will be over-worked, academics loaded with further administrative tasks and students will lose a rare source of advice and help.

Many more jobs are expected to be eliminated when WSU unveils a new school structure, a student inquiries restructure and other cost-cutting plans. These come on top of numerous rounds of restructuring and job cuts over the past two decades, including the removal of more than 250 professional and academic staff last year, via “voluntary” redundancy packages.

These new measures are part of an unprecedented assault on staff and students nationally. Last week, the Liberal-National government called on universities to tear up staff conditions in order to impose the multi-billion funding cuts announced in the government’s

May budget.

Education Minister Simon Birmingham urged universities to “seize” on an August 29 Fair Work Commission decision to terminate the enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) at Perth’s Murdoch University, paving the way for deep cuts to wages, fast-tracked sackings and the demolition of longstanding conditions. The NTEU nationally has already signalled it is prepared to finalise new EBAs that will include the level of cuts being demanded.

The WSU cuts have caused outrage among professional and academic staff alike, and the NTEU forum last Thursday was called in an effort to contain this anger. In an email to all WSU staff before the meeting, NTEU branch officials admitted that the cuts were “creating an enormous deal of anxiety and concern among professional staff.”

The email raised that the forum was “for all potentially affected staff to share their concerns, provide on-the-ground feedback on these proposals, and contribute towards a consolidated response.”

As soon as the meeting opened, however, it was plain that its true purpose was to prevent any discussion aimed at clarifying the “consolidated response” required to fight the cuts. In the first place, the forum was held via video-conferencing, with the 30 or so staff members present scattered across seven locations, making genuine dialogue difficult, especially with NTEU committee members controlling all the microphones.

NTEU branch president David Burchell opened the event by insisting it was not a venue for canvassing what lay behind the job cuts, let alone proposing action. “This is not a motions-passing meeting,” he declared.

Burchell sought to justify his position by revealing that the forum had been opened to non-NTEU members—an initiative the union, itself, had organised. He went on to declare that the event would be confined to hearing questions from individuals about how the union could help them. Even this was subjected to major constraints: the questions had to be within the framework of the rules governing the NTEU's EBA with WSU! These provide for only limited "consultation" or access to information from management about "organisational changes."

Burchell did not even mention the sackings of security guards, effectively separating them from those facing professional staff. Moreover, he said not a word about the Murdoch University ruling or the wider attack on tertiary education funding underway, which comes on top of the \$3 billion gouged out of universities by the previous Labor government.

Instead, the branch president presented the job losses as a product of WSU mismanagement. His remarks underscored the unions' efforts to keep workers in the dark about the economic and political driving forces of the attacks they face, which lie in the demands of the corporate elite for ever-greater cuts to social spending, while preparing ever-greater business tax cuts.

Mike Head, a *World Socialist Web Site* correspondent and academic at WSU, objected, insisting that a unified fight was urgently needed. "This is not just happening at WSU, but across the entire education sector, and throughout the working class as a whole," he said. "We need a political movement, and new forms of rank-and-file organisations, to answer this assault and reorganise society in the interests of all, not just the corporate profits of the financial elite." Burchell and other branch officials refused to allow Head to speak further.

Later, after staff members had raised angry questions about their plight, which involves many being required to compete with their colleagues to apply for the few new positions, Burchell instructed them to question their managers about their own futures.

Workers scoffed at this suggestion, with one pointing out that it was unrealistic to expect staff members to challenge their managers individually when they feared for their jobs. Burchell backtracked slightly, raising that it would be better for employees to approach their managers in groups.

Nevertheless, Burchell emphasised that there was

nothing the union could do, unless management breached clauses in the professional staff EBA. "Then the industrial laws will come into play and we can take cases to the [Fair Work] Commission," he said.

Head responded again: "These cuts will also have an intolerable impact on our students. With the complete support of the NTEU, universities are being transformed from places of learning and knowledge into institutions purely serving the interests of big business and the military-intelligence apparatus. The problem we face is that the NTEU will assist the management to inflict this job destruction, as it did with last year's so-called voluntary redundancies."

Again, Burchell and other committee members shut him down. In effect, however, they confirmed Head's warnings by declaring that the NTEU "wants to be involved in the change process." The union was assembling a response to the "shared services" blueprint, although the management showed no interest in such submissions, Burchell complained.

The branch president concluded the meeting on a revealing note. Anyone who joined the NTEU before September 15, he said, would obtain immediate assistance, whereas "normally there is a queue" for members to get advice from the union. His remark further underscored the contempt the union has for its members, and for their needs and concerns.



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