

Western Sydney University workers denounce cuts to jobs and conditions

Our correspondents

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After last Thursday's four-hour stoppage and protest rally, Western Sydney University academics and other workers spoke to the WSWS about the escalating attacks on their jobs and basic conditions, and the political issues raised by the role of the trade unions.

Among them was **Greg Pinchbeck**, one of the 41 security officers being retrenched by the university, and being replaced by contract labour. Pinchbeck has been employed at WSU for 14 years. He started in 2003 as a casual, and was made permanent in 2005. Before that he had worked at Telstra, the former publicly-owned telecommunications company, for 24 years, before being retrenched from there as well.

"At my age, I am going to find it very difficult to find another job," Pinchbeck said. "This is happening everywhere. We've been told it's this thing called 'flexibility.'"

Pinchbeck highlighted the problems that would arise from replacing all the security guards with contractors. Only a director and two regional managers would remain. "I know this campus inside out," he explained. "I know the people. I know the problems ... If we have mobile security contractors and there is a fire on campus, or an assault, it might take an hour to get here."

"The security industry has a lot of shonky practices. There are payments under the table, under-payments, employment of people on visas who are not legally permitted to work, and sub-, sub-, sub-contracting. The industry's got a bad name and that's what's going to happen here. You will have people trying to cope with emergencies who won't even know where the buildings are. People are going to get hurt."

Asked whether the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the other campus union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) were fighting to defend the security workers' jobs, Pinchbeck replied: "We have had regular meetings with management with both unions, but

not a lot has progressed as far as I can see ... Now they are talking about approaching Barney [Vice-Chancellor Glover] directly."

Pinchbeck said he had no opinion about the unions calling for the return of another Labor government. "I don't think there's any real answer politically," he commented. "They are as bad as each other. If I voted it would make no difference." He agreed "it's the capitalist system itself that's the problem," but said, "I really don't know what we are going to do about it."

A **medical school academic**, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of management retribution, was appalled by the staff cuts.

"For example, in the school of medicine we rely on small group learning," she said. "We only have a cohort of about 120 to 150 students. We have groups of 10 to 12 students, which is what got us accreditation as a medical school. Now it seems that we won't have enough casuals to do the small group learning, and going back to large groups is a step backward."

"We have been told we can't have a 'Rolls Royce model' anymore. We are not going to look at the quality like we used to do. This goes against all the requirements for innovative curriculum and quality teaching."

"There's a huge difference between having a group of 12 students discussing with a tutor facilitating that discussion, and having a 50-student tutorial, where you can't even identify struggling students. If you can identify the struggling students, you can support them and this is what we used to build upon at this university. We used to be famous for our student support, compared to other universities. Now we are taking all this back."

"What is happening with the restructure, the so-called Shared Services, is that we are also losing a lot of staff. Many of them don't even have the chance to apply for their positions because of the whole agreement that they have to apply for the same level and the same area that

they are working at ... We have lost a number of experienced staff and the corporate knowledge is going to go ... I am passionate about this."

Speaking about the NTEU's support for the Labor Party, the lecturer said: "I'm not pro or against Labor. It's about the principles. I'm for good quality education, that's what's important, and student support, as much as we can."

She was, however, critical of the last Labor government's "education revolution," commenting: "It's terrible. It's become a business and everyone now sees it as a business. But it's not supposed to be a business. Education and health are the two things that should not be touched. I agree with you that education should be free and first class at every level. We are going backwards in every way."

Two academics from the schools of social science and psychology were troubled by the small size of the rally, but could not see a way forward. "What else can we do, except keep fighting back?" one asked. "What else is there? What do you propose?"

WSWS correspondents explained that it was essential to expose the role of the Labor Party and trade unions in tying the working class to the entire capitalist framework of austerity, war preparations and moves toward authoritarian rule, and to provide an alternative socialist perspective. This included making clear the irreconcilable opposition of the genuine socialists of the Trotskyist movement to the betrayal of the 1917 Russian Revolution by the Stalinist bureaucracy.

One of the academics replied: "I totally agree that we can't keep going with the capitalist system. But the trouble with a socialist perspective is there's such a strong narrative that it's been tried and has not worked. Now, that's not true, we know it's not true, but it's such a strong narrative and it's really hard to fight against that. We know that Trotskyism was the opposite of Marxism, but you have to explain that."



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