Unions help impose new wave of job cuts in Australian universities

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On top of the thousands of job losses already inflicted on university workers across Australia this year, managements are now unveiling deeper cuts for 2021, assisted by the role of the trade unions in suppressing staff and student opposition.

Among the latest announcements are more than 200 jobs to be eliminated at Western Sydney University, up to 200 at Perth's Murdoch University and "hundreds" at Perth's Curtin University. At each institution, this follows other cost-cutting attacks such as pay and hiring freezes and higher workload allocations.

These moves are in addition to recent pronouncements of hundreds of job losses at Sydney's Macquarie and Sydney universities, and Melbourne's RMIT, La Trobe, Melbourne and Monash universities, with cuts of up to 30 percent in some targeted departments.

At a Senate Estimates hearing last month, federal Department of Education officials said its tally of job losses in the sector was about 4,000 already. That did not include contract and casual staff cuts, which the Australian Broadcasting Corporation estimated at 5,000 from two universities alone.

Despite the still worsening global COVID-19 pandemic, managements are also stepping up their demands for a return to face-to-face teaching, which will endanger the health of staff and students alike and increase the risk of further serious infection outbreaks.

Both of these offensives are part of the wider economic "reopening" and "restructuring" drive by governments and big business to exploit the pandemic to boost corporate profits and intensify the decades-long commercialisation and casualisation of universities.

University educators and professional staff, together with school teachers and staff, are being thrust into the frontline of this profit-driven offensive, alongside healthcare, aged care, industrial and retail workers.

In line with the rest of the trade unions, the response of the two main unions covering universities, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), has been to plead with the managements for negotiations on how to best enforce these measures on their members.

A graphic example is the role of the NTEU at Western Sydney University (WSU). There the management has just declared that more than 200 jobs must go for 2021, with 100 academic and professional redundancies on top of 103 unfilled full-time positions. Those totals do not include the termination of fixed-term and casual jobs.

At a WSU NTEU meeting on August 28, branch president David Burchell insisted that there was nothing that union members could do to stop the university offering "voluntary" redundancies (VRs) to eliminate jobs because it had the legal right to do so. Moreover, he said the CPSU was urging the university to use VRs as a means to cut costs.

Effectively given a green light by the NTEU and CPSU, the vice chancellor last week issued a call for VRs, backed by the thinly veiled threat of forced retrenchments if not enough people quit their jobs. While his email said there would be no forced redundancies or stand-downs without pay in 2020, "our most challenging years will be 2021 and 2022."

At the NTEU meeting, Burchell praised the management for undertaking a formal "change proposal" under its enterprise bargaining agreement with the NTEU, which gives it the right to slash jobs, provided it does so in consultation with the union.

Burchell reported that he and other NTEU office-bearers had renewed meetings with the vice-chancellor

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and other management executives to offer more sacrifices by the staff, including the “deferral” of a scheduled 2 percent pay rise.

Thus, as the WSWS warned would happen, the union is already going beyond the pay cuts to which it agreed just months ago at WSU—dressed up as the purchase of extra leave days—supposedly in return for guarantees of “job security.”

This is part of a broader drive by the NTEU nationally to inflict deeper cuts on university workers despite the rank-and-file hostility that forced the union to withdraw its offer to the employers of a “national framework” that would have cut wages by up to 15 percent and still accepted the elimination of about 18,000 jobs.

Burchell emphasised the union’s position that it always stood ready to work with management to devise further cost-cutting, under the false flag of avoiding greater job losses. In reality, the NTEU’s volunteering of concessions has encouraged the managements to go further.

The union claims that it will oppose forced retrenchments, but only because it fears the eruption of opposition. In a bid to quell discontent, it also has urged managements to provide the union with “financial transparency” to justify their cuts and to trim other areas of spending, such as construction projects, before eliminating jobs.

That only reinforces the framework created by successive governments, on behalf of the corporate elite, in cutting billions of dollars from public university funding over the past decade. Those punishing cuts began with the Greens-backed Labor Party government in 2011.

The NTEU’s line opposes the necessity for a unified struggle of university workers and students against all the cuts. It diverts staff at individual universities into seeking to help the managements draw up alternative cost-cutting measures, inevitably at the expense of the quality of education and the conditions of staff and students.

The “NTEU Fightback” group established by the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative echoes this position, underscoring the group’s basic agreement with the union.

Speaking to the corporate media about Curtin University’s job cuts, “NTEU Fightback campaigner” Alexis Vassiley said the university should halt its building program instead. Commenting on the university’s announcement, he said: “I think it’s absolutely unnecessary and what it represents is the institution putting buildings above people.”

Aided by the unions and their pseudo-left apologists, the federal Liberal-National government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison is exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic to intensify the assault on the public universities, deliberately further starving them of funds.

It has left the universities facing estimated revenue losses of more than $16 billion over the next four years alone, primarily caused by the pandemic’s impact on high-fee paying international students, while pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into corporate pockets via “stimulus” packages.

The government also has told the universities to focus on “greater alignment with industry needs” and launched an anti-China witch-hunt in the universities—demands that will accelerate the transformation of universities into corporatised businesses serving the needs of the financial elite and tying them into Washington’s military and economic confrontation with China.

Against this line-up, the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) call for a rejection of all the cuts and this entire pro-business agenda. This requires the formation of democratically elected rank-and-file committees of university workers and students, completely independent of the unions, which have shown they are nothing but industrial police forces.

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