

Ongoing job cuts at Australian universities as restructuring deepens

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A year on from the first avalanche of job destruction at Australia's public universities in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, it is ever-clearer that the emergency is being used to accelerate the pro-business gutting of tertiary education.

Initial illusions or hopes that the destructive impact of the crisis would be temporary have been dashed by the continuing offensive of university managements on the jobs and conditions of staff and students.

With the pandemic resurging around the world due to the profit-driven policies of capitalist governments, outbreaks continuing in Australia and government promises of timely vaccines being abandoned, there is no end in sight.

Moreover, the latest job cut announcements point to the underlying restructuring of universities. They include more staff cuts at the University of Newcastle, taking the total of job losses there to the equivalent of more than 110 full-time academic and professional staff positions.

At Sydney's Macquarie University, 90 more full-time academic positions have been targeted, now by forced retrenchments, in the latest "change proposals," on top of more than 350 "voluntary" redundancies of academic and professional staff already inflicted in 2020.

At Macquarie, as at some other universities, the retrenchments involve "Hunger Games"-style schemes that demand that university workers fight each other for survival in filling fewer positions.

Already many thousands of full-time jobs have been eliminated over the past 12 months, with untold tens of thousands more casual and fixed-term educators and administrative workers losing their livelihoods or having their hours slashed. By the NTEU's own estimate last year, the total could be as high as 90,000, although universities refuse to provide the relevant statistics on casuals and fixed-term staff.

At the same time, the Liberal-National Coalition

government is pushing ahead with its "job-ready graduates" and "micro-credentialling" programs, which have further slashed funding per student while intensifying the transformation of universities into vocational institutions servicing the narrow profit requirements of employers.

None of this would be possible without the role of the trade unions covering university workers, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU).

A year ago, once the pandemic erupted, the NTEU rushed into backroom talks with the employers, volunteering wage cuts of up to 15 percent. This was fraudulently dressed up as a "job protection framework," even though the union said it would still accept thousands of redundancies.

When the NTEU finally unveiled its agreement last May, after weeks of secretive discussions with the employers' representatives, NTEU president Alison Barnes claimed that it would: "Save at least 12,000 jobs nationally," "Limit redundancies and prevent stand-downs without pay" and "Help casual and fixed-term staff to regain and retain their work."

That was always a fraud. As the WSWs warned at the time: "Having spent two years locking university workers into the latest round of enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs)—which the NTEU also hailed as victories—the union is working hand-in-glove with individual managements to tear up anything in these EBAs that stands in the way of the unprecedented attack on pay and conditions."

When outraged university workers objected to the NTEU's scheme, most university employers pulled out of the national deal, concerned that the union could not enforce it. But the NTEU then proceeded to strike comparable agreements with individual universities, pushing them through despite members' discontent,

paving the way for job losses, sacrifices of pay and conditions, increased workloads and cuts to courses.

This response typified that of all the trade unions. It was in line with the pledge offered by Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus that the unions would give employers “everything you want” in response to the pandemic.

Over the past year, the NTEU has systematically isolated university workers, institution by institution, opposing any unified struggle against the government-management assault. At one meeting after another, NTEU officials have insisted that no such struggle was possible because of the anti-strike Fair Work laws, covering up the fact that this reactionary legislation was drafted by the last Labor government with the full agreement of the unions, precisely to muzzle the working class.

How far the university employers have exploited the unions’ role has been indicated by the revelation that 10 of the 16 universities whose financial outcomes for 2020 are known have announced operating surpluses. That is, they have overcome the losses of international student revenue and government funding at the expense of university workers and students.

Far from lessening, however, this ruthless cost-cutting will only intensify as the loss of international students continues and the lack of fresh intakes flows through university balance sheets for the next few years at least.

The NTEU is now trying to corral university workers into another round of enterprise bargaining, while appealing to the employers for a closer partnership. The NTEU has appealed to the employers to “sit down collectively” with the union to address the “new and different realities.” That is, the essential purpose of the union-management bargaining is to enforce the ongoing offensive, in the name of adjusting to the “new realities.”

Barnes wrote in this month’s first edition for 2021 of *Connect*, an online NTEU magazine for casuals: “This year sees the commencement of bargaining at many of our universities and the prospect of a federal election... The government’s failure to deal with the scourge of insecure work across our economy points to the need to organise at our branches in preparation for bargaining. We need to work with those in parliament prepared to defend and support higher education and casual employees more broadly.”

This “bargaining” will no more protect casuals than the deals the union has struck for the past decade and more. During that time, the proportion of university employees on insecure terms has risen above 65 percent (43 percent

as casual and 22 percent on fixed-term contracts).

Rather, enterprise bargaining is designed to keep university workers straitjacketed in the Fair Work laws and subordinate them to the demands of each employer as they compete for survival in the tertiary education “market.”

This industrial enforcement function of the unions was institutionalised under the ACTU’s Accords with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments in the 1980s and 1990s, and entrenched under the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013.

By promoting speculation of an early federal election, the NTEU is also attempting to tie university workers to the return of another Greens-backed Labor government. That is despite the Rudd and Gillard governments being responsible for the market-style “education revolution” that laid the foundations for the under-funding and accelerated commercialisation of higher education.

As a result of Labor’s “revolution,” federal grants for higher education teaching rose from \$9.3 billion in 2010 to only \$11.9 billion in 2019, despite larger enrolments. By contrast, private school funding increased from \$8.1 billion to \$12.1 billion, thus exceeding the university budget for the first time.

To fight this historic assault, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) are calling for the formation of joint rank-and-file committees of staff and students, completely independent of the unions, to fight for a unified struggle against the huge cuts to jobs and courses.

A recent IYSSE-CFPE online meeting adopted a resolution that gave a lead to this struggle. It demanded that, instead of big business being bailed out with billions of dollars, and billions more being handed to the military, resources be poured into healthcare and education funding, to protect the population from COVID-19 and guarantee the basic social right to free, first-class education for all students, including international students, and full-time jobs for all university workers, including casuals.



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