

Rank-and-file committees needed at Australian universities to fight cuts, commercialisation and militarisation

Committee for Public Education

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Having already suffered a tsunami of destructive cuts to jobs and courses during the first three years of the ongoing global COVID-19 disaster, Australia's university staff and students confront even more fundamental attacks as they return in 2023.

They face an agenda of intensified pro-business restructuring and integration into military research and war plans, as well as deepening budget cuts. These developments threaten to further corporatise and militarise universities, and further erode the access of young people to high-quality tertiary education.

The deepening attack on university conditions has been possible only because the opposition of university workers and students has long been stifled by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the other main campus union, the Community and Public Sector Union, as well as the student unions, mostly aligned with the Labor Party.

That is why university workers, together with students, need to build new organisations in order to fight the corporate-government agenda, which also includes disastrous “let it rip” pandemic policies, ever-increasing social inequality, soaring inflation, a climate catastrophe and the danger of frontline involvement, via the AUKUS and Quad alliances, in a US-led war against China.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators' network established by the Socialist Equality Party, is advocating and assisting the formation of rank-and-file committees on campuses to fight for the interests of staff, students and the working class as a whole, against those of the ruling elite.

As 2023 opens, university managements, supported by the trade unions, are demanding full or majority returns to face-to-face learning, without basic safety measures, even as the profit-driven “live with the virus” policies continue to exact a terrible toll of reinfection, deaths, Long COVID and other serious health impacts.

At the same time, universities are signing agreements with

the world's largest US-allied arms manufacturers to develop weaponry in fields such as quantum technologies, hypersonics, cyber warfare, robotics, artificial intelligence and space warfare. All the public universities have now signed the federal government's Defence Science Partnership.

In a submission to the Albanese Labor government's “Defence Strategic Review,” Universities Australia has gone further, urging the government to establish “internships” (sponsorship of students who would be committed to military service after graduation) to funnel students—including international students from “allied” countries—into the Australian military.

More destruction of jobs, conditions and courses is also looming. While the university unions praise the Albanese government, it is imposing further billion-dollar cuts. According to the government's own budget papers, higher education expenditure is expected to decrease by more than 9 percent in real terms from 2021–22 to 2024–25.

That is on top of a \$10 billion cut to university funding over the past decade, starting with the Rudd-Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013. Propped up by the Greens, those governments implemented a pro-business “education revolution.” This insidious “demand-driven” competitive regime forced universities to rely increasingly on under-paid and insecure casual or fixed-term staff—now 70 percent of the workforce! (up from 60 percent in 2000)—and become more dependent on milking full-fee paying international students.

Building on this damaging framework, the Albanese government's agenda includes the further restructuring of universities, via a so-called Universities Accord, to satisfy the vocational and research demands of the corporate elite and the US-aligned military-intelligence establishment.

Backed by the university unions, the Accord panel features Macquarie financial services group CEO Shemara Wikramanayake, personifying the financial elite. Labor's

terms of reference specifically calls for “alignment” with vocational education to produce the skills required by employers, and stronger research “collaboration between universities and industry to drive greater commercial returns.”

Labor’s first budget last October allocated just \$485.5 million, over four years, to finance 20,000 additional higher education places. But even these limited extra places are tied to vocational courses designed to meet employer “skills shortages.” Universities also have to compete for the funding. This is Labor’s version of the “micro-credentialling” courses initiated by the previous Liberal-National Coalition government.

The unions embrace this entire agenda. They are continuing to try to push through enterprise agreements that slash real pay and facilitate restructuring. As its model, the NTEU hails a “big win” at Western Sydney University (WSU) that confines wage rises to an average of just 3.5 percent a year—well below the official inflation rate. The supposed victory at WSU in securing just 150 new full-time jobs for casual teachers over three years is a sham, leaving management the right to pick and choose which, if any, of the casuals is “appointable.”

When COVID-19 hit in 2020, the NTEU rushed into backroom talks with the university managements, offering outright wage cuts of as much as 15 percent and up to 18,000 job cuts. After this naked sellout provoked a revolt among university workers, the NTEU nevertheless bulldozed through similar schemes to impose sacrifices on staff at individual universities. The union vehemently opposed, and sought to silence, calls by CFPE members for a unified struggle, across all campuses, against this assault.

University workers, together with students, need to review these bitter political experiences. It is impossible to defend public education without breaking out of the straitjacket of the NTEU and other unions, and the anti-strike enterprise bargaining laws they enforce.

These organisations cannot be reformed or “renewed” as various pseudo-left groups claim. The unions are industrial police forces, staffed by highly-paid and privileged bureaucrats (NTEU president Alison Barnes and national secretary Damien Cahill are each on \$216,101 a year) who work hand-in-hand with Labor, and the Greens, to implement the demands of big business.

As a result of the many betrayals of the unions, their membership is imploding—the NTEU lost almost 2,000 out of nearly 28,000 members from 2021 to 2022. But quitting the unions in disgust is not an answer in itself. Staff and students have to take matters into their own hands. For that, new organisations must be built.

Staff and students need to form rank-and-file committees throughout universities, independent of the unions, to turn to unified struggles with workers in Australia and internationally, including those of university workers in the US, UK and worldwide. These committees would democratically develop demands based on the needs of workers and students, not corporate profit. Such demands could include:

- Free first-class education for all students instead of the government pouring billions of dollars into preparations for more US-led wars
- Annual staff pay rises to catch up and match inflation
- Restoration of all jobs eliminated, including from 2020 to 2022
- Reduction of intolerable workloads that make genuine research or professional development impossible
- The right of all casualised university workers, many of whom have eked out an insecure existence for years, to secure ongoing employment
- Protection from the pandemic, including safe ventilated facilities and the right to work from home

Such demands inevitably mean taking a stand against the Labor government and the ruling class as a whole. This is part of a broader necessary struggle against capitalism and to reorganise society along genuinely democratic and egalitarian, that is socialist, lines in the interests of humanity, not the soaring profits and wealth accumulation of billionaires.

This is the perspective advanced by the CFPE, as part of the worldwide fight to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to provide the means for workers to organise and unify their struggles globally. To discuss how to form rank-and-file committees, and obtain help to do so, please contact the CFPE:

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