

Australia: Sweeping pro-business restructuring and job cuts at Western Sydney University College

Our correspondents
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In a move that threatens to set a precedent across the tertiary education industry, Western Sydney University (WSU) has launched a wholesale restructuring and destruction of scores of jobs at WSU College, the university's wholly owned feeder college.

The educators and professional staff at WSU College face the elimination of the equivalent of 17 full-time positions, or more than 13 percent of the teaching and learning jobs, and a vicious "spill and fill" regime to force them to compete against each other for the remaining posts.

Those being targeted by WSU's "organisation change proposal" include 15 teachers, around 6 First Year Experience Coordinators, 10 Learning and Teaching Coordinators, 7 managers and 6 technical officers. The heaviest cuts are to arts, literature and humanities, which will be decimated.

For years, the campus trade unions have allowed sub-standard, highly-casualised and super-exploited conditions at such colleges. Now a new benchmark of even worse conditions is being threatened.

WSU College management blames falling enrolments. This points to wider processes across the tertiary education sector. The College's business model—offering students preparatory courses that lead straight into the second year of university degrees—has been undercut because all the country's chronically-underfunded universities are scrambling for enrolments, including by offering students alternative pathways into courses.

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has issued no university-wide campaign against this wholesale attack. Most WSU staff and students don't even know it is happening.

The union is isolating the WSU College staff, while effectively helping management get people out the door

by attrition and by raising the suggestion of supposed "voluntary" redundancies.

In fact, the union backs the thrust of the restructuring, and falsely claims that its members do as well. In its written response to management's "change proposal," the WSU NTEU branch said it and its members "freely acknowledge" that the College faces "historic challenges to its viability," and support moves "to position the College better in the industry."

In order to assist the job destruction, the union calls on management to include an "EOI [expression of interest] in redundancy process," saying this is required under the NTEU's 2022 enterprise agreement with management.

This not an isolated event. WSU is also slashing jobs in the library and elsewhere. But the NTEU and its WSU branch leaders have proposed no action to oppose the restructurings. Instead, they are enforcing the union's enterprise agreements, which permit such "change proposals" and prevent industrial action to defeat them.

In 2022, the NTEU pushed through new retrograde enterprise agreements at both WSU College and the university itself. At the College, after six years of below-inflation wage rises since the previous agreement was struck in 2016, the pay rises were less than half the predicted official inflation rate.

Moreover, the agreement attacked leave entitlements and cleared the way for further corporate restructuring at the expense of jobs and conditions. The NTEU agreed to assist the College "to remain competitive in the market," which meant "it may need to change its structure, operations, and priorities to meet business requirements."

At WSU itself, the union leaders claimed an "historic win" for the entire tertiary sector, yet the agreement imposed sub-inflation pay rises and, in the name of "decasualisation," created a new super-exploited body of

teachers with little time for research.

This destructive environment is being driven by the Labor government's ongoing funding 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 15 years, starting with the Rudd-Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013.

The government's cuts to the international student intake are also having a sharp impact on universities, which have become dependent on these full fee-paying students. Federation University is axing 200 jobs as a result. This another sign of a wider attack on jobs and conditions across the sector.

This financial squeeze is being intensified by the Labor government's Accord blueprint. It demands a further corporate restructuring of tertiary education, including funding, teaching and research, to satisfy the specific narrow employment and research demands of big business and preparations for war.

The Accord report insists on a shift to "micro-credential" courses and "work integrated learning" (WIL) programs tailored to meet the needs of employers. These will embed students in industry throughout their courses, featuring tied "degree apprenticeships."

One of the report's examples is that the University of South Australia is partnering with the South Australian Labor state government, the Australian Industry Group—a peak employers' body—and "the defence industry" to develop university degree apprenticeships to support the construction of AUKUS nuclear-powered submarines.

The AUKUS military pact involves spending hundreds of billions of dollars to build or acquire US and UK nuclear-powered attack submarines, long-range hypersonic missiles and other hi-tech weaponry, especially designed for use in a US-led war against China.

WSU is restructuring the College in line with this agenda, to focus on STEM and industry-linked skills subjects, including advanced communications as part of the AUKUS program. A recent "town hall" presentation to staff proclaimed a "strategic alignment." It made frequent references to the Accord, such as "Accord calls for focus on microcredentials."

The Accord proposes tying university funding to "mission-based compacts" with a new Australian Tertiary Education Commission. This is bound up with the Albanese government's calls for an "all of nation" war

economy, with universities on the front line of teaching and research.

The Accord report calls for concentration on "areas of national priority like clean energy, critical technology, minerals and defence." All these fields are related to the Labor government's commitment to US war plans, which include its support for the Israeli genocide in Gaza, as well as for the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, which threatens to trigger a nuclear conflict.

The NTEU and the other main union covering university workers, the Labor Party-affiliated Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), oppose any unified struggle of university workers because they fundamentally agree with Labor's program. The NTEU welcomed the Accord report, describing it as "an ambitious reform blueprint."

For years, the NTEU and CPSU leaders have suppressed educators' hostility to the creeping transformation of universities into corporate entities. In fact, as at WSU College, they have pushed through enterprise agreements that facilitate pro-business restructuring.

To fight this union-backed agenda, university workers and students need to form rank-and-file committees—new genuine democratic organisations of struggle—completely independent of the unions. If you agree, please contact us to discuss forming a rank-and-file committee:

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