

Australia: NTEU opposes fight against job cuts and restructuring at Western Sydney University College

Our correspondents
22 May 2024

A call by Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporters for a campaign to defeat a wholesale restructuring and destruction of jobs at Western Sydney University (WSU) College was blocked by National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) representatives at a meeting of College NTEU members on Tuesday.

WSU management is threatening the educators and professional staff at WSU College, which the university wholly owns, with the elimination of the equivalent of 17 full-time positions and a “spill and fill” regime to force them to compete against each other for the remaining posts.

Those targeted by WSU’s “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.

On Monday, SEP supporters—members of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE)—submitted the following resolution to the NTEU branch office to be circulated and discussed at Tuesday’s online meeting, which the union described as a report back on its talks with management:

• We call on all staff, whether NTEU members or not, to reject the NTEU’s written response to the management’s “change proposal,” in which the WSU NTEU branch accepts restructuring and proposes redundancies to assist the elimination of jobs. The response claims that the NTEU branch and its members support moves “to position the College better in the industry” and calls for an “EOI in redundancy process” under the NTEU’s 2022 enterprise agreement with management.

• We resolve to launch a campaign across WSU as a whole and throughout the university sector to win the support of all our academic and professional colleagues to

defeat the destruction of our jobs and conditions.

• We support the formation of a rank-and-file committee, independent of the NTEU, to organise this campaign.

In a reply email, NTEU branch president David Burchell outrageously accused College staff member Gabriela Zabala, who submitted the resolution, of “harassing” a union official by simply asking for a resolution to be circulated, as is the democratic right of every worker.

Burchell declared that Zabala was “uncomradely and disrespectful” and charged her with “openly attempting to subvert the democratic processes of the union.” He concluded by alleging that she was “playing cynical party-games” and “that’s completely shameful.”

That hostility continued at Tuesday’s meeting, which was attended by less than 25 College staff members out of about 200. Many staff have no confidence in the union, on the basis of previous sellouts.

Burchell, who chaired the meeting, flatly rejected a motion by Zabala to circulate, discuss and vote on the resolution.

When Michael Head, a longstanding WSU academic and NTEU member, said he wanted to support the motion, Burchell declared that he had no right to be at the meeting because he was not a College member.

Head insisted: “All members should be able to participate in this discussion. This is not just about the College. We can’t leave our College colleagues alone to fight this. And the union is not proposing to fight it. You are proposing to get redundancies instead. We all have a stake in this. If it happens at the College, it will happen to all of us. You are trying separate us. This is an issue for all members. Put it to a vote.”

After Burchell refused to allow a vote, Zabala objected. “This is terribly anti-democratic. The NTEU did not

circulate this motion to all members. That speaks volumes.”

Ludicrously, Burchell claimed that by her logic, any NTEU member could turn up at a College members’ meeting and raise whatever they wanted. Zabala replied: “No. This is about the conditions. WSU wholly owns us. It affects all of us. What happens here will be determined at the university, and it will affect what happens at the university.”

When Head again asked for the motion to be put to a vote, he was suddenly removed from the zoom link.

During the meeting, Burchell made clear the union’s opposition to any fight to stop the pro-business restructuring or defend all the jobs at the College. He told the meeting it was “beyond our power” to defend every job. “We can’t make all the redundancies go away,” he stated.

Instead, backed by NTEU industrial organiser Cian Galea, Burchell welcomed management’s offer, made in an email that morning, to accept the NTEU’s call for “EOIs [expressions of interest] for redundancy where possible” to “enable early departures via the redundancy EOI process.”

Burchell repeatedly told the meeting that some people might want to quit, and that was their right. What became evident is essentially a partnership between the NTEU and management to stifle opposition by pressuring or encouraging staff members to apply for redundancies.

Zabala told the meeting that this confirmed the warning made in the resolution that the union blocked. “The union is working with management to suppress opposition to the redundancies. We have to defend every job and condition, and call for support across the university and more broadly, and form a rank-and-file committee.”

She said the union was trying to “pressure people into leaving, at the cost of jobs and programs for students, because nobody will benefit from this restructuring, not us and not the students.”

Burchell ignored her call for the resolution to be debated. One staff member said he agreed with Zabala that university staff had to be informed about what was taking place at the College. He also revealed that management had told a group of colleagues that they would have to take “steps down” in their positions, even if they kept a job.

In response to several questions, Burchell and Galea reiterated that the union was seeking to enforce its 2022 enterprise agreement with WSU College. In that document, however, 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.”

Toward the end of the meeting, Burchell said he was “cautiously confident of bedding down” a potential dispute over the job losses. He also asserted that the union had no “industrial purchase” over the damaging impact that the restructuring would have on the quality of the courses offered to students.

These statements must be taken as warnings that the union is moving as fast as it can to assist the management to implement its blueprint. This is in line with the federal Labor government’s agenda of continuing to starve the public universities of funding and demanding further pro-business restructuring.

WSU College enrolments have dropped, essentially because its business model—offering students preparatory courses that lead straight into the second year of university degrees—has been undercut by all the country’s chronically-underfunded universities scrambling for enrolments, including by offering students alternative pathways into courses.

This financial squeeze is being intensified by the Labor government’s Universities Accord. It demands the reshaping of tertiary education to satisfy the specific employment and research demands of big business and preparations for war, such as the AUKUS military pact against China.

Pushing workers into supposed “voluntary” retrenchments is the time-honoured method used by the NTEU and every other union to stifle resistance to the elimination of jobs and conditions.

What happened at Tuesday’s meeting makes it absolutely clear: To fight this union-backed agenda and organise a university-wide and broader campaign to defeat the restructuring and job cuts, WSU staff and students, whether union members or not, need to form a rank-and-file committee, completely independent of the unions. If you agree, please contact the CFPE, the rank-and-file educator’s network:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [@CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact