

Australia: A rank-and-file committee will fight job cuts at Western Sydney University College

Our correspondents

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A meeting of Western Sydney University (WSU) staff and students on Wednesday voted to form a rank-and-file committee to oppose the job destruction and restructuring at WSU College. To join the inaugural meeting of the committee, to be held on Zoom next Wednesday at noon, contact: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Staff and students from Western Sydney University (WSU) voted at a meeting yesterday to form a WSU Rank-and-File Committee to organise a campaign against the destruction of scores of jobs and the pro-business restructuring of WSU College, the university's wholly-owned feeder college.

They did so in opposition to a deal struck with the WSU management by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) to impose the job losses and stifle resistance by encouraging or pushing staff members to accept so-called voluntary redundancies.

They decided to launch a fight against the role of the NTEU in trying to block any campaign against the job cuts and isolating the WSU College workers so that virtually no staff members or students at WSU even know about the pro-business restructuring of the college.

WSU management is demanding the elimination of the equivalent of 17 full-time educators' positions—or more than 10 percent—and a “spill and fill” regime to force staff members to compete against each other for the remaining posts. The heaviest cuts are to arts, literature and humanities, including the abolition of the English department.

Opening the meeting, WSU College lecturer Gabriela Zabala asked: “Where are the leaflets and posters from the NTEU opposing the job cuts and restructuring? There are none.

“If there is going to be a fight to inform, alert and win the support of the WSU staff, it will have to come from us, not the NTEU.

“This restructuring is not just the work of the WSU College management. It comes from the very top of WSU itself and can therefore only be fought by a unified campaign across the university.”

Zabala warned that the NTEU leadership is hostile to any rank-and-file fight against the decimation of jobs and conditions. That flowed from the union's 2022 enterprise agreement with WSU College, in which it 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.”

With the predetermined agreement of the NTEU, that was precisely what WSU management was doing with the decimation of the WSU College and the elimination of jobs.

Zabala answered an accusation that she and other supporters of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file network, and the Socialist Equality Party were hiding their political affiliations.

“We have never hidden the fact we are supporters of the CFPE and SEP,” she pointed out. “It is no accident that socialists are organising the necessary campaign against the cuts, against the NTEU's refusal to do so.

“Taking a stand for quality education and the defence of jobs and conditions means rejecting the dictates of management, governments and the corporate elite.

“But rank-and-file committee membership does not require political agreement. The committee will be democratically elected, based on a willingness to organise a counter-offensive.”

WSU educator Mike Head told the meeting: “College staff cannot be left to fight this attack on their own. This is an issue for all of us, including students, at WSU and at all the universities...”

“What is happening at WSU College is part of a wider picture. Unless this assault on jobs and conditions is defeated, it will set another precedent across WSU and throughout the tertiary education sector.”

Head said the *Australian Financial Review* had reported the day before that about 2,000 jobs have already been lost in the international education sector as universities, private colleges and recruitment firms are hit by the Labor government’s cuts to international student enrolments.

According to the report, job losses will escalate, and another 6,000 workers could be forced out of the sector in the next six months as the cuts bite.

Under these conditions, the NTEU officials were helping to eliminate jobs, Head warned. “What has been formed at WSU College is essentially a partnership between the NTEU and management to stifle opposition by pressuring or encouraging staff members to apply for redundancies.”

Head said the Albanese Labor government was continuing to starve the public universities of funding, forcing them to scramble for enrolments, including by offering students vocational “micro” courses and alternative pathways into degree programs.

This financial squeeze was being intensified by the Labor government’s pro-business Universities Accord, drawn up by a panel that featured the CEO of Macquarie Bank. Based on the Accord report, the government was demanding the wholesale reshaping of tertiary education to satisfy the specific employment and research demands of big business and the preparations for war, such as the AUKUS military pact against China.

During the discussion, an academic employed as a casual at WSU College said it was necessary to “bypass” the union, with which he had bad experiences years ago. He voiced deep concerns about the way education had been increasingly casualised and corporatised for decades.

Another WSU College educator said she agreed with the need to form a rank-and-file committee. She provided a picture of the onerous conditions at WSU

College, saying she was coordinating multiple subjects at a time.

A WSU student, a member of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality club at the university, said students were also being kept in the dark about what was happening at WSU College. He noted that the Labor government was spending \$368 billion on AUKUS submarines and that military spending would mean deeper cuts to education.

Educators from the University of Sydney and the Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee related their experiences in being blocked by NTEU representatives, while raising the need for a unified struggle across the universities against the attacks on jobs and conditions.

Sue Phillips, the national convenor of the CFPE, said teachers in the schools also faced acute staff shortages and excessive workloads as a result of being straitjacketed by enterprise agreements rammed through by the education unions using anti-democratic methods.

After the discussion, the meeting voted to establish the WSU Rank-and-File Committee, independent of the NTEU. It formed a steering committee to draft a founding statement, a set of demands and an action plan to present for discussion at the inaugural meeting of the committee next Wednesday.

The committee’s first task will be to organise an information campaign throughout WSU and other universities and call for support for a university-wide and broader campaign to defeat the restructuring and job cuts.

It is calling on WSU staff and students who agree with this stand—whether union members or not—to join next Wednesday’s meeting and help launch and build the committee. To attend the meeting, to be held on Zoom at noon, or send a message of support, contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: [facebook.com/commforpubliceducation](https://www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation)

Twitter: @CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)