

Rank-and-file member removed from Australian university union meeting on Western Sydney University College job cuts

Our correspondents

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A meeting of Western Sydney University (WSU) staff and students last week 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 this Wednesday June 19 at noon, contact: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

In what can only be described as a case study in bureaucratic censorship, National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) representatives yesterday removed a well-known rank-and-file union member from a Western Sydney University (WSU) College staff meeting called to discuss the sweeping jobs cuts and pro-business restructuring at the college.

As soon as the online Zoom meeting commenced, Gabriela Zabala was ejected. She received a message saying the host had removed her, without any explanation. Her repeated attempts to rejoin the meeting were also rejected, leaving her colleagues perplexed and concerned about what had happened to her.

The union's move badly backfired, however, once members were able to contact Zabala and she sent them the screenshot of her removal.

Two members in the meeting then introduced a procedural motion demanding Zabala be allowed to rejoin the meeting, which was passed by a majority. That vote is a blow to the union's hostile efforts to prevent a democratic discussion on the need to fight against management's job destruction of WSU College staff.

Not only is Zabala one of the educators who faces losing her job at WSU College, WSU's wholly-owned feeder college. She is widely-known and respected among her colleagues for taking a leading role in initiating the formation of a WSU rank-and-file committee to launch a campaign across WSU and the university sector to prevent the job destruction.

The sparse attendance at the meeting—less than 20 out of a workforce of some 200—also showed how little support the NTEU has at WSU College. That is because of its history of betrayals of members' interests, and now its acceptance of WSU's destructive "change proposal."

The union has reached a deal with management to modify the final change plan to facilitate job losses and restructuring by

encouraging staff to apply for so-called voluntary redundancies, which is intended to stifle staff members' opposition.

Trade union bureaucrats have used this method for decades to pressure workers into quitting and taking miserable retrenchment packages to help employers get them out the door.

Yesterday's NTEU meeting itself was poorly advertised. It was only confirmed by emails from NTEU branch president David Burchell on Wednesday afternoon, a day before management, with the union's go-ahead, released the final version of its blueprint on Thursday.

The "change proposal"

This administration/union proposal—incorporating tenuous offers to apply for redundancy packages and other modifications proposed by the NTEU—underscores the necessity to take the dispute out of the hands of the union apparatus.

The plan confirms the overall elimination of the equivalent of 17.6 full-time positions (17.6 FTE), saving WSU \$2.8 million a year. This includes the "disestablishment of all 20 FTE Learning and Teaching Coordinator positions," "the disestablishment of all 16.8 FTE First Year Experience Coordinator positions" and the reduction of teacher positions from 44.6 to 28.5 FTE.

Educators will still be forced to compete directly against each other in a "spill and fill" selection process, for the remaining jobs. The heaviest cuts will remain to the arts, English and humanities subjects, thus depriving students of access to critical, broad-based courses, rather than the narrow vocational ones demanded by employers.

Educators who are selected for employment can be pushed into lower-paying posts, with their present salary level only promised for 12 months.

The plan also confirms that all subjects in the re-badged

“Destination College,” as of 1 January 2025, will be taught as four-week intensive blocks. This “block method” means even more onerous workloads for teachers and coordinators, with all assessment and marking to be completed in just one month.

It also makes it virtually impossible for casual teachers, many of whom rely on semester-by-semester work at other institutions to make ends meet, and further erodes the quality of the courses for students.

The document asserts that the restructuring is needed to ensure the college’s “long-term economic sustainability.” The NTEU is enforcing this agenda in line with its 2022 enterprise agreement with WSU management, in which it pledged 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.”

Zabala, when she was eventually readmitted after 40 minutes to the scheduled one-hour meeting, was given just three minutes to speak, preventing any real discussion on her resolution, which she read out to the meeting:

- We call on all staff, whether NTEU members or not, to reject the WSU management’s “change proposal,” and demand the retention of all jobs, with no loss of pay or conditions.
- 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 to organise this campaign.

Zabala objected to her exclusion from the meeting, saying it was completely anti-democratic and showed how unions treated their members.

Despite the majority vote overturning Zabala’s exclusion, union officials provided no explanation for their action. At a previous meeting, another rank-and-file committee participant, WSU educator Mike Head and NTEU member, was likewise evicted on the pretext that he was not employed by WSU College.

Yesterday’s meeting finished in a mood of confusion and disillusionment, sowed by the NTEU, with members asking numerous questions about management’s plan. Burchell said he could not answer the questions, instead asking members to email them to him.

Burchell has previously falsely accused Zabala of exploiting the WSU College cuts to recruit members to the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators’ rank-and-file network, and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP).

Zabala and Head have always explained that they are supporters of the CFPE and SEP. They have pointed out that it is no accident that socialists are organising the campaign against the cuts, necessitated by the NTEU’s refusal to do so.

That is because taking a stand for quality education and the defence of jobs and conditions means rejecting the dictates of management, governments and the corporate elite, as well as

the union bureaucrats who enforce their demands.

The final management plan claims that the College enrolments will have dropped by 43 percent by the end of 2024 from 2021, but that is not the fault or responsibility of the over-worked staff and their students.

As the document admits, the restructuring is driven by “increased competition.” It states: “An increase in alternative entry programs, lowering of university entry requirements and growth in alternative options across the post-secondary education sector are creating increased competitive pressures, impacting student options and decisions.”

This ever-greater scramble by university managements for enrolments underlines the Albanese Labor government’s continued under-funding of universities, which has forced managements to increasingly depend on fees from international students, whose numbers the government is now slashing.

According to various reports, as many as 8,000 jobs could be destroyed in the tertiary education sector during the next six months as a result. That shows the difficulty that displaced WSU College staff will face if they accept the NTEU’s advice to seek redundancy offers.

It also demonstrates that the battle at WSU College is a critical one for educators everywhere. If the NTEU-backed restructuring is not defeated it will set a benchmark for the entire sector.

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

The first task of the WSU Rank-and-File Committee 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.

We call on WSU staff and students who agree with this stand—whether union members or not—to join this 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

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



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact