

Australian university union tries to block campaign against Western Sydney University College job cuts

Our correspondents
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A meeting of Western Sydney University (WSU) staff and students last month voted to form a rank-and-file committee to oppose the job destruction and restructuring at WSU College and across the university sector. To join the committee contact: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is seeking to stop a fight by rank-and-file staff members at Western Sydney University (WSU) against pro-business restructuring and job destruction at WSU College, the university's wholly-owned feeder college.

WSU NTEU branch president David Burchell sent an email to the union's members at the College on July 3 that attempts to split them into "individual cases" and encourages them to accept redundancy packages.

This has only one purpose: To prevent a rank-and-file campaign across WSU against the restructuring, which would axe more than 10 percent of the teachers' and learning coordinators' jobs at WSU College and set a precedent for a wider assault on jobs and conditions throughout the university sector.

After refusing to organise any fight throughout WSU against the restructuring, the NTEU last month struck a deal with WSU to revise the management's "change proposal" in order to facilitate the job cuts via so-called voluntary redundancies.

This was done behind the backs of staff and students at WSU College and across the university as a whole. Most staff and students at WSU still know nothing about the job losses, apart from campaigns conducted by supporters of the rank-and-file fight against the restructuring.

The deal with management was then presented as a fait accompli to a NTEU branch meeting on June 27, which was held at a time when most WSU College members could not attend, due to a mandatory teaching workshop.

Burchell rejected a call by a directly-affected rank-and-file WSU College staff and union member, Gabriela Zabala, and WSU educator Mike Head for the meeting to be rescheduled.

Now, Burchell declared in his email, the time has come to "protect and assist members individually. And so we've created individual cases for each and every member at the

College who requests it." This is designed to put pressure on WSU College staff to try to deal with the attack as individuals.

The final management-NTEU "change proposal" confirms the "disestablishment," or abolition, of most teaching and learning coordinating positions.

Educators will be forced to compete directly against each other, through a "spill and fill" selection process, for the remaining jobs. Even those hand-picked for employment can be pushed into lower-paying posts, with their present salary level only promised for 12 months.

Overall, the equivalent of 17.6 full-time teaching and learning positions will be eliminated, saving WSU \$2.8 million a year.

The heaviest cuts will be to the arts, English and humanities, depriving students of access to critical, broad-based courses, rather than the narrow "job ready" ones demanded by employers.

Burchell's latest email further seeks to divide staff members by insisting "we cannot assist non-members, and your non-member colleagues will have to join before they can receive any advice." This means the NTEU is effectively wiping its hands of non-union members.

Most staff at WSU College, and WSU as a whole, are not NTEU members, largely because of the union's record of working closely with management, selling out one struggle after another, and imposing retrograde enterprise agreements (EAs).

In the email, Burchell falsely stated that a "well-attended meeting of members [at the College] on June 14" went through new portions of the "final change plan" that are "definitely better and fairer for members."

The email claims that an "industrial dispute" by the NTEU has improved the plan, because the new provisions "maximise your ability to locate yourself within the new structure" and "allow staff to elect redundancy if you simply want to leave rather than compete with colleagues in ringfenced recruitment."

Burchell adds, "these new processes are compliant with the College EA."

In that EA, which the NTEU rammed through small members' meetings in 2022, 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.”

The truth about the June 14 meeting is that as soon as it started, NTEU representatives undemocratically removed Zabala from the Zoom meeting, which was attended by less than 20 members.

A majority vote of her colleagues eventually forced the NTEU officials to allow her to rejoin the meeting 40 minutes later. But Zabala was given just three minutes to speak, preventing any real discussion on her resolution, which the NTEU had refused to circulate:

- 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.

The final NTEU-backed “change proposal” confirms that all subjects in the re-badged “Destination College,” to commence on 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, and further erodes the quality of the courses for students.

A WSU academic spoke to the WWSWS about the wider implications of the restructuring. “As an educator at Western Sydney University I am very concerned about what is happening at the WSU College,” she said. “The students from the College do far better once they start at the university, including because they get training in research and research ethics.

“As parents too, it impacts our children. We encourage them to get an education, but for what?

“What is happening at the College is absolutely a blueprint for WSU. We are interrelated. We approve the WSU College courses. We are also already doing short courses, like the ‘block teaching’ being introduced at the College, and there is talk of shorter semesters.”

She also drew a connection between these issues and the war agenda being pursued by the US and European governments, supported by the Labor government in Australia. “It is heartbreaking seeing what is happening in Gaza. It’s up to us to act.”

The final “change proposal” asserts that College enrolments will drop by 43 percent by the end of 2024 from 2021. That is not the fault or responsibility of the over-worked staff. As the document admits, the restructuring is driven by “increased competition,” including via “alternative entry programs” and “lowering of university entry requirements.”

The scramble by university managements for enrolments is driven by the Albanese Labor government’s continued underfunding of universities, which has forced them to depend on fees from international students, whose numbers the government is now slashing. As many as 8,000 jobs could be destroyed in the tertiary education sector during the next six months as a result.

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

While starving the universities of funds, the Labor government is pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into military spending and backing the US-armed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

The NTEU is intent on suppressing opposition to this entire agenda. That is why the development of a WSU Rank-and-File Committee is so essential. 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.

As teaching resumes from the mid-year break, the rank-and-file committee plans 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.

If the NTEU-backed restructuring is not defeated it will set a benchmark for the entire sector.

We call on WSU staff and students who agree with this stand—whether union members or not—to join our next meeting and help build the committee. To do so, please contact us:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

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