

# Growing anger over Australian university job cuts but NTEU deflects blame from Labor government

Mike Head

3 December 2024

Concerned opposition is developing at universities across Australia to the latest wave of job destruction, course closures and pro-corporate restructuring under Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government.

In recent weeks alone, university managements have announced more than 2,000 job cuts, with more threatened. This is a direct result of the Labor government's reactionary nationalist cuts to international student enrolments, on top of Labor's deepening of the decades-long chronic under-funding of tertiary education.

The resistance was reflected in a vote late last month by staff members at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra to reject the management's proposal that they sacrifice a 2.5 percent wage increase due this December—effectively a one-year pay freeze—supposedly as the only alternative to save jobs.

A total of 4,782 of 6,400 eligible staff participated in the management ballot, a measure of the widespread willingness to fight the escalating attack on jobs, pay and conditions throughout the higher education sector.

In response, the management, currently headed by Vice-Chancellor Genevieve Bell, a corporate figure, is now preparing alternative cost-cutting measures to inflict a planned \$250 million budget cut.

Despite the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) claiming a victory in the ballot, some 650 jobs are likely to be axed, accompanied by the "streamlining" of seven colleges into six. That is after the management previously eliminated 465 jobs in the first year of the COVID pandemic.

The NTEU is trying to deflect the blame for the latest attack on pay and jobs onto Bell as an individual, and away from the Labor government, whose agenda is driving the cuts nationally.

There is also outrage and discontent just several kilometres away, at the University of Canberra (UC). Stephen Parker, UC's interim vice-chancellor, resigned this week, saying he had lost confidence in the university's council after preparing a budget to save about \$50 million by the end of next year, which would include cutting at least 200 jobs.

Parker is the third UC vice-chancellor to vacate the role in less than a year. In February, former Labor leader Bill Shorten is due to become the fifth UC vice-chancellor in the space of 14 months.

No doubt, the university council has appointed Shorten on the basis of his long record of service to the corporate elite as a trade

union bureaucrat and government minister, most recently in devising cuts of billions of dollars in the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

The job axing at the two Canberra-based universities is only the tip of the iceberg. In a report on "bad university governance" released last month, the NTEU said 11 universities had proposed "at least 2,091 job losses in late 2024."

Apart from ANU and UC, the union's list includes up to 500 job cuts at the University of Technology Sydney, 200–300 at the University of Wollongong, 163 at Federation University, 50–75 at James Cook University, more than 72 at the University of Southern Queensland, 49 at Griffith University, and 28 to 55 at La Trobe University.

The list also mentions "pending" job losses at the University of Tasmania, a "retirement program" at Swinburne University and "hiring restrictions" at the universities of Sydney, Melbourne and Newcastle.

This list is clearly incomplete. It excludes the pro-business restructuring of Western Sydney University's College, at the cost of some 17 percent of the workforce. About 100 jobs are also being destroyed at Monash University. Southern Cross University recently announced the closure of its entire arts program. Thousands more jobs of casual staff are being slashed around Australia as well.

The immediate source of this assault is the Albanese government's intent to slash international student enrolments by up to 50,000 a year, through arbitrary means, despite the parliamentary defeat of its bills to inflict that cut via enrolment caps at each university.

To slash enrolments, the government has also doubled visa fees for international students and implemented harsher English language and other entry tests. It is vying with the Liberal-National Coalition to scapegoat international students, along with refugees and other non-citizens, for the worsening cost-of-living and housing crisis devastating millions of working-class households.

Labor's attacks on international students are financially damaging because successive governments, Labor and Coalition alike, have slashed funding and pushed universities into relying on international students as cash cows, charging them exorbitant fees, in order to operate.

Since taking office in May 2022, Labor's budgets have cut

spending, in real terms, on universities along with schools, hospitals, the NDIS and other essential social programs, while allocating hundreds of billions of dollars for war operations, particularly in Ukraine against Russia and through the AUKUS military pact against China.

The 2022 and 2023 budget papers showed that the government's higher education expenditure would decrease by more than 9 percent in real terms from 2021–22 to 2024–25. That is deepening a \$10 billion cut to university funding over the past decade, starting with the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013 and taken further by the Liberal-National Coalition governments from 2013 to 2022.

This is the result of the “education revolution” implemented by the Greens-backed Rudd and Gillard Labor governments. Their “demand-driven” competitive regime forced universities to rely increasingly on casual or fixed-term staff and on milking full-fee paying international students.

Far from proposing a unified fight back by university staff against the intensifying Labor government-led onslaught on universities, the NTEU is applauding the government for supposedly granting what the union calls “a significant win in our campaign to fix university governance.”

In a November 28 email to members, the NTEU national leadership claimed that Education Minister Jason Clare would soon announce an “expert governance council” that would shine a spotlight on million-dollar salaries for vice-chancellors and “crack down on systemic wage theft from academics and lecturers.”

This followed the release of a NTEU “Ending Bad Governance for Good” report, which revealed that 306 university executives nationally were paid more than state government premiers. That included vice-chancellors receiving more than \$1 million a year.

Via a media release, NTEU national president Dr Alison Barnes stated: “We want to congratulate the federal government for taking strong action to make million-dollar vice-chancellor salaries a thing of the past.

“The federal government must be applauded for responding to our calls for governance reform. Today is a great step towards better universities.”

The truth is that universities have undergone pro-corporate restructuring under Labor and Coalition governments for decades.

The NTEU's report covers up the Labor government's funding cuts, saying instead that “some” of the problems had been compounded by cuts to domestic student funding through the previous Coalition government's 2020 “Job Ready Graduates” measures.

The NTEU officials accuse the university managements of exploiting the international student cuts as a pretext for cuts, and claim that the government's Universities Accord proposes increased funding per student.

In reality, the government's tightening financial squeeze on the universities is calculated to enforce the Accord blueprint. It ties funding, via individual university “mission statements” to the reshaping of tertiary education to satisfy the employment and research needs of big business and the AUKUS preparations for a

US-led war against China.

The Universities Accord report, released in February, calls for courses to be designed “with the skill needs of industry in mind,” making special mention of the \$368 billion “AUKUS nuclear submarine program.”

The NTEU bureaucrats have a long record of suppressing educators' hostility to the increasing corporatisation and militarisation of universities, even when they claim to oppose it. While striking regressive enterprise bargaining deals with university managements, all designed to assist restructuring, the NTEU machine has repeatedly blocked any unified mobilisation against it.

At Western Sydney University (WSU), the NTEU has struck a deal with the management to facilitate the WSU College restructuring by encouraging educators to apply for redundancy packages and by refusing to defend non-NTEU members. The majority of educators at the College are not NTEU members because they have no confidence in the union bureaucracy as a result of its previous betrayals.

To answer these attacks and Labor's underlying corporate and military agenda, staff and students need to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the complicit trade unions. These committees would develop and fight for demands based on the educational and financial needs of students and staff, not the dictates of the financial markets, and turn out to broader sections of the working class for a common struggle.

That means a fight against the Labor government and capitalism itself, to reorganise society along genuinely democratic and egalitarian, that is socialist, lines in the interests of humanity, not the corporate ruling class.

This is the perspective advanced by the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators' network. We have already supported the formation of rank-and-file committees at Western Sydney and Macquarie universities. This is part of the worldwide fight to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to provide the means for workers to organise and unify their struggles globally.

To discuss how to form rank-and-file committees, and obtain help to do so, contact the CFPE:

**Email:** [cfpe.aus@gmail.com](mailto:cfpe.aus@gmail.com)

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

**Twitter:** [CFPE\\_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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