

# Labor government-driven cuts and restructuring hit Western Sydney University

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Deep job cuts and sweeping restructuring at Western Sydney University (WSU), a predominantly working-class university, provide another warning of the broader pro-business and pro-military assault on Australia's public universities under the re-elected Albanese Labor government.

On the eve of the May 3 federal election, WSU vice chancellor George Williams confirmed that up to 400 academic and professional staff jobs, or nearly 15 percent of the university's workforce of more than 3,000, would be axed unless equivalent savings could be made.

Similar cuts are being unveiled across the country, so far totalling more than 3,000 jobs. These include 400 at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), up to 650 at the Australian National University (ANU), 200 at the University of Canberra, at least 150 at the University of Wollongong and many more at other universities, such as Federation, James Cook, Southern Queensland, Griffith, La Trobe, Tasmania and Swinburne.

In a May 2 email to staff, Williams reported that one of the main factors contributing to WSU's "financial challenges" were "international student caps, a non-refundable \$1,600 visa fee (which is expected to go higher regardless of the federal election result), and visa processing delays from key Southeast Asian countries, that collectively are having a dramatic impact on the capacity and willingness of international students to study with us."

What he did not say, was that these enrolment cuts, fee hikes and visa delays have been inflicted by the Labor government. In the lead up to the election, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government sought to outdo the Liberal-National Coalition in slashing international student numbers, as part of a reactionary nationalist campaign to blame them and immigrant workers for the worsening cost-of-living and housing affordability crisis affecting millions of working-class households.

Having failed to get its proposed student enrolment caps through parliament, the government proceeded by an arbitrary ministerial decree. Last December it issued immigration Ministerial Direction 111, which ordered the slowing of the processing of visas for overseas students once their intended university or other tertiary education provider hit 80 percent of the government's previously announced cap.

Direction 111 seeks to ensure that Labor achieves its goal of reducing enrolments by 53,000 (or 16 percent) on 2023 levels, eliminating thousands of jobs in the process in universities and

private colleges. This attack on international students forms part of Labor's plans to halve overseas migration to 235,000 annually for the next three years.

This is a poisonous drive to divide the working class along national and ethnic lines, just as the Trump regime is doing with its mass deportations. In Australia, as in the US, the social crisis is not caused by "foreigners." It is rooted in the capitalist profit system itself, dominated by banks, billionaires, retail chains and property developers.

In his email, Williams also cited "depressed demand from domestic students, especially low SES [socio-economic status] and first in family students, due to cost-of-living pressures and a strong job market."

That is an oblique reference to another feature of the Labor government—its continuation of an historic cut to working-class living standards, forcing more young people into low-wage employment.

By 2027, Williams said the WSU management expected 1,155 fewer government-funded domestic Commonwealth Support Places (CSP) students and 1,207 fewer international onshore students.

The management is conducting a "product review" aimed at consolidating courses with "low demand"—usually a code name for courses not directly linked to employers' skill training demands. This will lead to job losses in targeted non-vocational areas.

A "campus review" is also underway to possibly shut campuses or reduce the numbers of courses offered at each.

To further cut costs via a "Reset Western" plan, WSU's 12 schools will be reorganised into three more business-focussed faculties by the start of 2026. The School of Law, for example, will join a yet to be named faculty with Business, Education, Communication, Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences.

Since Labor took office in 2022, it has intensified the chronic under-resourcing of universities by successive Labor and Liberal-National Coalition governments over the past decade.

Labor's first budget showed that higher education expenditure would decrease by more than 9 percent in real terms from 2021–22 to 2024–25.

That has deepened 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 Coalition governments from 2013 to 2022.

The Albanese government's financial squeeze is aimed at

forcing the universities to integrate themselves more fully into the demands of big business and the military, as set out in Labor's Universities Accord, which ties funding to "national priorities," including the AUKUS military preparations for war against China.

This is in line with a wider political and ideological assault on universities internationally, spearheaded by the Trump administration's moves to cut off funding to US universities that do not comply with its fascist agenda of suppressing opposition, including to the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

The Trump White House has threatened to do the same to jointly US-funded researchers in Australia and internationally unless their projects serve the needs of US foreign policy and military objectives. It sent out invasive questionnaires, with which the Albanese government urged researchers to comply.

Williams' announcement follows the precedent set by last year's gutting of the workforce at WSU College, the university's preparatory college, and the imposition of unbearable conditions on educators and students, cramming entire subjects into four-week blocks.

This confirms the warnings issued by the Socialist Equality Party-supported rank-and-file committees at WSU and Sydney's Macquarie University that the WSU College restructuring is a test case for the kinds of conditions to be inflicted on the tertiary education sector as a whole unless there is a unified fight by staff and students against this historic assault.

## Unions block unified struggle

Opposition exists throughout all the universities to job destruction, course closures, pro-corporate restructuring and suppression of dissent. But the union apparatuses have opposed any unified fight by university staff and students, as they have for decades.

The leaderships of the main campus trade unions, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), have opposed any industrial action, just as they did during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when they openly advocated accepting thousands of job losses.

As is the case nationally, the response of the WSU NTEU branch leaders has been to try to block a struggle by staff and students against the Labor government's measures. A May 7 email to NTEU members by branch president David Burchell blamed the cuts on the management, not the Albanese government, and proposed to suggest "positive measures to address the actual financial shortfall."

That is, the NTEU is offering to advise the management on how to implement the Labor-driven cuts, as it is at other universities, such as Sydney's Macquarie University.

The NTEU is also seeking to straitjacket staff within its enterprise bargaining agreements with management. According to a slide shown at a May 1 WSU NTEU branch meeting, these agreements "require that a position is only redundant where the work is no longer required to be done. This would have to be

established on a case by case basis."

That provides a framework for atomising staff opposition into "case by case" disputes, while accepting the entire rationale of "work no longer required."

The NTEU has a long record of helping managements push people out the door via nominally "voluntary" redundancies, as it has done at WSU College.

Nationally, the NTEU has covered up the role of the Labor government, backed its return and welcomed its victory. In a May 6 email to members, the NTEU national office claimed that its members had "played an important role in preventing Peter Dutton's Coalition from damaging higher education."

Before the election, NTEU national president Dr Alison Barnes accused Dutton of hoping to "win votes by making students into a convenient scapegoat over housing" in a policy that would "potentially lead to thousands of job losses across the sector" in a "direct attack on public universities."

There was not a word about Labor's demonisation of international students for the same purpose.

Now the NTEU's May 6 email is pumping illusions in "pushing" Labor to "make good on its promises." One of these "promises" was to "implement key recommendations of the Universities Accord final report." But the axis of that report, with which the NTEU is fully onboard, is to further align the universities with the requirements of the corporate ruling class and the development of AUKUS and other war-related industries.

The Labor government, like the Trump administration, has also sought to suppress opposition to the genocide and ethnic cleansing in Palestine, including by instigating moves to freeze the research grant of Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah at Macquarie University.

To fight this agenda, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is calling for, and helping form, rank-and-file committees (RFCs) at universities. This is essential so that staff, along with students, can form their own organisations to develop and fight for demands based on the educational and financial needs of students and staff.

Students everywhere must have the fundamental social right to a decent, all-round critical education, and educators and researchers must be free to conduct genuinely socially useful and scientifically important teaching and research, not that dictated by the "national priorities" of the ruling class.

These RFCs can unite with educators and students globally via the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) for a common struggle against the capitalist system and its plunge into trade war, war and dictatorship.

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