

Australia: Labor's university job cuts raise critical political issues

A WSU Rank-and-File Committee member

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Critical issues are posed by a staff-student rally called at Western Sydney University (WSU) on June 3 against the threatened 300-400 job cuts at the predominantly working-class university.

These cuts are clearly not just a WSU question. They are part of a wider axing of jobs, courses and programs that has already led to the announcement of now more than 3,000 job losses throughout Australia's 39 public universities over the past six months.

All these cuts flow from the Labor government's reactionary cuts to international student enrolments and its underlying under-funding and pro-corporate restructuring of universities.

Yet the organisers of the WSU rally—the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) branch leaders and the WSU Student Representative Council (SRC)—are trying to cover up the role of the Albanese government in pursuing this offensive.

Similar damaging cuts, course closures and restructuring, in one form or another, are being unveiled across the country. These include up to 400 jobs at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), up to 650 at the Australian National University (ANU), 200 at the University of Canberra, and at least 150 at the University of Wollongong.

Other known losses include scores at universities such as Macquarie, Tasmania, Charles Darwin, Federation, James Cook, Southern Queensland, Griffith, La Trobe and Swinburne.

Protests by staff and students have been held at many universities, including UTS, ANU, Wollongong and Macquarie. But the leaders of the NTEU and the other main campus trade union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), oppose any unified fight by university workers and students against what has become a wave of job destruction, especially targeting arts and humanities.

Since Labor's re-election on May 3, Education Minister Jason Clare and the new assistant minister for international education Julian Hill have vowed to intensify the assault by further cutting international student enrolments and tying university funding to "mission-based compacts."

In media interviews over the past week, Clare and Hill have boasted of not only slashing international student enrolments by 30 percent this year—which is having a severe impact on university finances—but of preparing to use funding "compacts"

to redirect universities in line with the government's agenda.

Clare told the *Australian Financial Review* that his re-appointment as Labor's education minister "gives me an enormous opportunity to continue the unfinished business." This is a warning of Labor's pro-business and pro-military restructuring of universities, as a key part of its accelerated second-term agenda of austerity and commitment to US militarism.

The student cuts and "compacts" are the cutting edge of the transformation of higher education, as specified in the government's Universities Accord report. That report, handed down in February 2024, declared that the universities must dedicate both their teaching and research to meet the vocational requirements of employers and "national priorities," such as the AUKUS military pact directed at preparing for a US-led war against China.

In order to divert attention away from Labor's agenda, the NTEU and the SRC's "Stop WSU Cuts" group are insisting that the threatened WSU job cuts are the result of a "false narrative"—to disguise either "financial mismanagement" or distorted revenue predictions by the administration.

To shield the re-elected Labor government, the NTEU and SRC even claim that the WSU management is cynically blaming the government for the cuts, and exploiting Labor's measures, supposedly to pursue its own "business model."

But this "business model" itself—branded as "Reset Western"—seeks to redirect both teaching and research to meet the needs of the corporate elite and the development of a war economy. This flows from the Universities Accord.

The Accord report nominated "areas of national priority like clean energy, critical technology, minerals and defence" as needing "more skilled professionals." All these fields are related to the geo-strategic interests of Australian imperialism and its commitment to US war plans.

One of the models endorsed by the Accord report was: "To support AUKUS, the University of South Australia is partnering with the South Australian Government, the Australian Industry Group and the defence industry to develop university degree apprenticeships to support the construction of nuclear-powered submarines."

As part of its "Reset Western" model, WSU is competing

with other universities to deliver such programs. This includes just-announced “micro-credential” six-week short courses for employers to produce young workers with “job-ready skills” in areas such as ramp operations, ground handling and security screening at the new Western Sydney airport.

A three-pronged attack

Three Labor government moves are driving the universities in this direction, at the expense of genuine higher education.

One is Labor’s attack on international students, on whose fees the universities have become dependent because of chronic under-funding, especially since the previous Rudd-Gillard Labor government of 2007 to 2013.

The Albanese government has imposed severe international student caps, enforced by lengthy visa processing delays, and trebled the non-refundable international student visa application fee to \$1,600. Labor will hike this again to \$2,000 on July 1, and impose more severe discriminatory English-language requirements, proof of \$29,710 in the bank and a supposed “genuine-student” test.

These reactionary measures must be opposed. Together with the Liberal-National Coalition, Labor is making international students scapegoats for the cost-of-living and housing affordability crisis which is continuing to hit working-class households. For the same reason, it is also slashing immigrant numbers and preparing to deport up to 95,000 refugees whose asylum applications have been rejected, echoing the mass deportations of the fascistic Trump administration.

Second, universities are receiving lower per-student funding due to the Labor government’s continuation of the previous Morrison Coalition government’s pro-business “Job Ready Graduates” program, which seeks to herd students into vocational courses.

Over 40 percent of all domestic students—and a large majority of those from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds, including Indigenous students—now pay tuition fees of \$16,992 a year for degrees in the arts, social sciences and humanities, including law, history, business and English. The government subsidy paid to universities is just \$1,286 a year.

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.

Third, the Labor government has advised universities and researchers to comply with an invasive lengthy questionnaire sent by the Trump administration threatening to cut off funding for joint US research unless their projects served the needs of US foreign policy and military objectives.

So far, according to media reports, at least 10 universities

have suffered research funding cuts already, which will mean deeper job losses.

This is in line with the Trump regime’s unprecedented offensive against government jobs, social services, science, public health, public education and environmental protection, and its moves to cut off funding to Harvard and other US universities that do not comply with its dictatorial suppression of dissent, including over the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

The Labor government, like the Trump administration, is also seeking to silence opposition to the ethnic cleansing in Palestine, notably by Clare instigating moves to freeze the research grant of Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah at Macquarie University.

Labor won the May 3 election by associating the Coalition with the Trump agenda, but it is headed down the same path.

To fight this agenda, the genuine socialists—the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality—are calling for a unified struggle by staff and students across the country.

To organise this counter-offensive, we are calling for the formation of rank-and-file committees of staff and students at universities, completely independent of the unions. This is essential so that staff and students can form their own organisations to develop the fight against the Labor government and the plunge of global capitalism into dictatorship, trade war and war.

We urge staff and students to contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators’ rank-and-file network, to discuss how to form rank-and-file committees:

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: CFPE_Australia

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/oppouseaeusellout



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact