

Union blocks staff and students from speaking at Western Sydney University job cuts rally

A WSU Rank-and-File Committee member
3 June 2025

National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) officials barred staff members and students from speaking at a rally against 300 to 400 threatened job cuts at Western Sydney University (WSU) yesterday. “No open mic,” NTEU WSU branch president David Burchell declared repeatedly during the event when challenged.

In particular, the NTEU physically blocked WSU Rank-and-File Committee member Michael Head, a longtime WSU educator, and WSU International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) club president Zach Diotte, after they put up their hands to speak.

About 100 people attended the rally, although many were union officials and their supporters, including members of pseudo-left groups, such as Socialist Alternative, that support the trade union apparatuses. None of the pseudo-left representatives objected to the blocking of Head and Diotte or the exclusion of all staff and students from speaking.

In an anti-democratic display, Richard Bailey, an NTEU organiser, stood right in front of Head and Diotte as soon as they indicated to speak. This political censorship was clearly undertaken on behalf of the national and New South Wales (NSW) state leaders of the trade union, who were present.

Before the rally, Head had asked Burchell for the right of himself and other WSU staff members and students to speak at the event, which was organised by the NTEU and the official WSU Student Representative Council. Burchell declared: “No! There never has been and their never will be, an open mic at our rallies.”

As Head explained after the rally, he and Diotte sought to speak in order to call for a unified movement of staff and students across Australia against the more than 3,000 job cuts currently being imposed by university managements, as well as against the global assault on universities and international students, being spearheaded by the fascistic Trump administration in the United States.

Head and Diotte planned to point out that the wave of job destruction in Australia flows directly from the Albanese Labor government’s slashing of international student enrolments and continued under-funding of the country’s 39 public universities and that these measures echo the Trump White House’s axing of funds to key universities, its international student bans and deportations, and its de-funding of research projects that do not serve the administration’s political and ideological agenda.

By contrast, the NTEU representatives tried to portray the cuts at WSU as the result of either financial “confusion” on the part of Vice-Chancellor George Williams or an attempt by Williams to intimidate staff in the leadup to negotiations for the next three-year enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) between the union and the management.

Above all, the NTEU speakers tried to cover up the role of the Labor government and its Trump-like measures, which include blaming international students for the housing and cost-of-living crisis affecting working class households and financially squeezing the universities to force them to transform themselves in line with the government’s Universities Accord.

That financial pressure includes Labor’s continuation of the Morrison Liberal-National government’s Job Ready Graduates scheme, which hits humanities students with fees of up to \$17,000 a year, while severely underfunding the universities for those students. That has intensified the impact of billions of dollars in cuts since the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013.

The Accord’s final report, unveiled last year, ties university funding for both teaching and research to “mission-based compacts” to serve “national priorities,” particularly the narrow profit needs of employers and the AUKUS military pact against China, which is part of the development of a war economy.

Significantly, the NTEU speakers revealed their desire to partner with the WSU and other university managements to help them identify and implement the required cuts and restructuring. Burchell said he was in constant communication with Williams, entreating him to jointly develop such a “package.” Burchell described Williams as a “decent” but “confused” man. “We’re here to help,” he said.

This is a warning of the NTEU’s willingness to assist management, as it has done for years, including at WSU College, the university’s preparatory college, over the past 12 months. The College has been ruthlessly gutted and restructured along corporate lines, at the expense of staff and students alike.

The NTEU blocked any WSU- and sector-wide fight against the College carve-up. Instead, it facilitated a purge of the staff via supposed “voluntary” redundancies. As a result, the staff are being subjected to intolerable conditions, such as the timetabling of classes from early mornings to late evenings, impossibly short marking deadlines, campus closures and relocations, which have resulted in many resigning due to stress and exhaustion.

Like Burchell, Vince Caughley, the NTEU’s NSW division secretary, said the union wanted to work with Williams and the WSU board to “help them take the right course.” He claimed that the union was not “letting the Labor government off the hook,” yet insisted that all the job cuts at universities in NSW were just the product of “financial mismanagement.”

In the same vein, NTEU general secretary Damien Cahill described Williams as a union member and human rights lawyer with whom the NTEU hoped to cooperate. But then, in an effort to explain Williams’ threatened job cuts, he accused the vice-chancellor of trying to strike fear in the minds of staff before the next round of EBA talks.

Angry protests against job cuts have been held at many individual universities, including Wollongong University, University of Technology Sydney, the Australian National University and Macquarie University, but the NTEU and the other main campus union, the Community and Public Service Union (CPSU) are keeping these struggles isolated and, above all, they are covering up the role of the Labor government.

At the May 3 federal election voters overwhelmingly rejected the Trump agenda of trade war, war and massive government funding cuts, which they identified with the Liberal Party, but Labor is undeniably pursuing Trump-style policies.

Education Minister Jason Clare has boasted of cutting

international student enrolments by 30 percent. The government also advised researchers to comply with the Trump administration’s threatening questionnaire, as a result of which at least 10 universities have already suffered funding cuts.

Moreover, the Albanese government has slandered opponents of the US-backed Gaza genocide, including students and academics, as antisemitic. Clare intervened personally to ask the Australian Research Council to freeze its grant to Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah at Macquarie University.

The WSU rally underscored how much the Albanese government depends on the capacity of union officials and their pseudo-left allies to divert and suppress the brewing discontent in the universities and the working class as a whole.

To fight the transformation of universities into corporate entities serving a war economy, it is essential to form rank-and-file committees of staff and students at universities, completely independent of the unions.

These committees can discuss, freely and democratically, how to defeat the cuts across the country, and develop the struggle against the Labor government’s complicity in the plunge into dictatorship, trade war and war.

These committees can coordinate their plans and activities with educators in the US and around the world through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

This is part of the broader necessary struggle against the capitalist profit system itself and its program of ever-greater corporate wealth and barbarism.

We urge staff and students to join the existing rank-and-file committees at WSU and Macquarie through the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators’ rank-and-file network, or contact the CFPE to discuss how to form rank-and-file committees:

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

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

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact