

Western Sydney University staff vote for strikes, but union opposes unified fight against job cuts

A WSU Rank-and-File Committee member
7 July 2025

An online meeting of National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members at Western Sydney University (WSU) last Thursday voted by 99 percent for strikes against management, which is threatening to axe up to 400 academic and professional jobs.

The proceedings at the meeting, however, underscored the NTEU leadership's intent to keep the anger and opposition of university workers trapped within the straitjacket of seeking enterprise bargaining deals at individual universities over the next year or so.

In response to remarks by WSU Rank-and-File Committee member Michael Head, there was a further display of the attempt by NTEU officials to block any unified fight against the more than 3,000 job cuts being implemented or unveiled throughout Australia's 39 public universities.

This avalanche of job destruction flows directly from the policies of the Albanese Labor government—including its halving of international student enrolments. These policies are designed to financially pressure the universities into further pro-corporate restructuring, along the lines of Labor's Universities Accord, to meet the requirements of employers and the government's war-related "national priorities."

Thursday's meeting voted by 99 percent for stoppages of between 5 minutes and 24 hours, and by 78 percent for indefinite strikes. That is another indication of the desire of university workers everywhere to find means to fight the job losses. But the NTEU leaders kept these possible actions tied to seeking to negotiate an Enterprise Agreement (EA) deal with WSU management.

These votes do not mean immediate action. On the contrary, the NTEU will now apply to the government's pro-employer Fair Work Commission (FWC) for permission to conduct a staff-wide ballot for such

stoppages or various limited work bans. This could take weeks or even months.

In their presentations to the meeting, NTEU WSU branch president David Burchell and NTEU senior industrial officer Josh Gava, a former Labor Party staffer, emphasised that the Fair Work Act, introduced by Labor, outlaws strikes except during union-controlled EA bargaining periods. Any industrial action outside that framework could see the NTEU and individual members heavily fined for taking "unprotected action."

They said the Albanese government's amendments to the Act now also meant that unions had to participate in compulsory "conciliation" proceedings in the FWC before even being permitted to have such a vote.

Burchell reported that nine fortnightly EA meetings with management on proposed agreement clauses had gone "nowhere." Instead, management had tabled clauses to remove the limited "due process" provisions in the existing "unsatisfactory performance" clauses. This would open the way for staff members to be sacked purely at managerial discretion.

Head, a longtime WSU educator, first asked in the Zoom chat why no unified fight was being organised across the sector against the job cuts. In response, Gava claimed that the NTEU was coordinating its university branches, but said the union could not take industrial action because EA bargaining had not yet commenced elsewhere. In fact, it would not start until next year at some universities.

This effectively means preventing any fight against the job destruction. The NTEU has held isolated protest rallies at some universities, such as WSU, Macquarie, University of Technology Sydney, Wollongong University and the Australian National University, but these have failed to halt the assault.

When Head spoke, he said the NTEU representatives had tried to hide “the elephant in the room”—that the job cuts nationally were driven by the Labor government’s agenda, which included developing a war economy for a US-led war against China.

Head opposed Labor’s punishing caps on enrolments by international students, making them scapegoats for the ongoing unaffordable housing and cost-of-living crisis, as well as Labor’s continuation of the previous Liberal-National Coalition government’s “job ready” graduates scheme, which was cutting domestic student enrolments by imposing fees of nearly \$17,000 a year on arts and humanities students.

Worse was to come, Head warned. As of January 1, each university’s funding would be tied to a “mission-based compact” with a new government-appointed Australian Tertiary Education Commission, setting out how the university would contribute to Labor’s corporate- and military-related agenda.

Head pointed to similar financial and ideological attacks on universities in the UK and US, both by the Starmer Labour government and the Trump administration. He said the WSU and Macquarie Rank-and-File Committees had issued a statement calling for a unified campaign against the Albanese government’s offensive.

In reply, Burchell declared that he disagreed with Head’s remarks. He claimed that WSU vice-chancellor George Williams had “good” intentions, yet was using the government’s cuts as an “excuse” for an “invented narrative.”

As Burchell had at a NTEU protest rally last month, where he blocked Head and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) WSU club president Zach Diotte from speaking, he said the union was trying to help management achieve its required cost-cutting without “mass job cuts.”

In fact, Burchell told Thursday’s meeting that the NTEU would like to propose a “counter-package” and would be willing to support a “voluntary redundancies” program.

This is another warning of the readiness of the NTEU, and not just at WSU, to collaborate with managements to enforce supposedly “voluntary” job cuts as the union has done repeatedly, including during the destruction of thousands of jobs in the first stage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Staff and students at WSU, like at other universities, are still paying a price for the NTEU’s COVID-19 betrayal. Burchell said WSU already had fewer staff today than

before the pandemic hit.

As the WSU and Macquarie Rank-and-File Committee statement concluded:

To fight this agenda, there has to be a unified struggle by staff and students across the country against the job cuts and restructuring. This requires the formation of rank-and-file committees of staff and students at all universities, completely independent of the trade union apparatuses.

These rank-and-file committees can link up with workers in Australia and worldwide through the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. They can develop demands based on the needs of students and staff, not the dictates of governments and the corporate elite.

The statement said these demands could include:

- “halt and reverse the thousands of job cuts and the resulting sky-rocketing workloads across the tertiary education sector
- stop the cuts to international student enrolments and defend the right of all students to higher education”

As that statement explained, this is part of a broader necessary struggle against capitalism itself and its program of ever-greater corporate wealth and turn to war and Trump-style dictatorial rule.

The WSU and Macquarie Rank-and-File Committees will shortly announce a national online public meeting at the start of semester two to discuss this campaign. To get involved in this fight, contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators’ rank-and-file network.

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

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