

Australia: NTEU volunteers job cuts at Western Sydney University

A WSU Rank-and-File Committee member
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The Western Sydney University and Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committees have called an online public meeting this Saturday, August 2 to fight for a unified campaign by educators and students against the Albanese Labor government's intensifying cuts to international student enrolments and jobs, and the underlying pro-corporate, pro-military reshaping of tertiary education. Register here.

Last Thursday, Western Sydney University (WSU) management unveiled a “voluntary redundancy” scheme as part of its plan to eliminate up to 400 academic and professional jobs, or more than 13 percent of the university's full-time workforce.

Not accidentally, the announcement came just one day after the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) revealed that it had made a similar proposal.

NTEU branch president David Burchell informed its members at the university, via an email, that in backroom negotiations it had suggested a “modest” voluntary redundancy “exercise” to Vice-Chancellor George Williams to cut jobs in “a decent and humane manner.”

This must be a warning of the wider readiness of the NTEU leaders to partner with university executives across the country. They are desperate to quash staff and student outrage over the current mass destruction of jobs—totalling more than 3,000 nationally so far.

This assault is being driven by the Albanese Labor government's reactionary cuts to international student enrolments and other measures, with a definite agenda: to transform tertiary education to satisfy the requirements of the corporate elite and the development of a war economy.

The NTEU and the other main campus trade union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), are covering up the Labor government's role. They are blaming individual vice-chancellors for the assault on jobs, even as they simultaneously seek to help them find ways to implement Labor's agenda.

The developments at WSU further expose the efforts of the NTEU and CPSU apparatuses to block any unified fight by staff and students against the job cut avalanche. Instead, they are trying to divert the anger of staff and students into isolated protests at individual universities.

In announcing the WSU retrenchment scheme, Williams,

himself a former Labor Party preselection candidate, avoided any mention of the Labor government. But he reported that WSU had 1,000 fewer international students this year than anticipated and had also suffered a 9 percent decline in revenue per domestic student because of the “Job-Ready Graduates” package.

The Albanese government has retained that program, imposed by the previous Liberal-National Coalition government, which has hiked fees for humanities students to \$17,000 a year, while slashing the funding to universities to deliver their courses.

While avoiding naming the Labor government, Williams gave some indication of its agenda, which is bound up with preparations for war. He said WSU faced “a fundamentally altered enrolment and funding landscape” that was part of a “broader sector-wide recalibration” with “tightened visa settings, shifting government policy and geopolitical insecurity.”

Led by Williams and Chancellor Jennifer Westacott, a former CEO of the Business Council of Australia, WSU management is seeking to meet Labor's demands through a “Reset Western” program, driven by a “Western 2030 Strategic Plan” that aims to “attract partnerships and investment” to western Sydney from companies and governments.

In this context, Williams readily accepted the NTEU's “voluntary” retrenchment proposal, while still insisting that more jobs would be eliminated if not enough staff members decided to resign. “By offering targeted voluntary redundancies, we aim to reduce the number of non-voluntary redundancies that could be required down the track,” he said in an all-staff email.

Williams also declared that “not everyone who applies for a voluntary redundancy will receive one.” Instead, the applications—open only to senior and long-standing staff—would be assessed on the basis of “broader workforce planning needs, the future requirements of the University, and budgetary objectives.”

Positions would be retained if “needed for Western's future state design, strategic priorities or compliance obligations.” In other words, the management will pick and choose the targeted jobs, in line with the pro-corporate and pro-government restructuring.

The management also set a snap deadline of August 3 for staff members to submit redundancy applications—indicating the speed with which it plans to proceed.

In his July 23 email, the NTEU's Burchell claimed that the union "has always been resolutely opposed to the VC's [vice chancellor's] proposed program of mass job cuts." He tried to distance the union from the management's plan, saying it went beyond what the union had suggested. But Williams' acceptance of the thrust of the union's proposal demonstrates the fraud of that pretence.

Burchell's email is no aberration. For decades, the NTEU and CPSU have collaborated with university managements to employ "voluntary" retrenchment packages as a means of pressuring staff members to quit and suppressing opposition to job cuts and restructuring.

The unions have refused to oppose Labor's punitive caps on international enrolments, which are making students the scapegoat for the worsening housing affordability and cost-of-living crisis affecting working-class households. Albanese's government has vowed to halve the number of international students, to 270,000 a year, from 548,000 in 2023.

The government is financially pressuring universities into transforming themselves along the lines of the government's Universities Accord.

This blueprint, issued last year, demands that Australia's 39 public universities subordinate both their teaching and research to the needs of big business and the construction of war-related industries, such as the \$368 billion AUKUS plan to acquire nuclear-powered attack submarines for use against China in a US-led war.

The government also plans to tie university funding, from next year, to "mission" compacts, signed with a new government-appointed Australian Tertiary Education Commission, to deliver the required outcomes.

As well as WSU, the confirmed job destruction list now includes Sydney's Macquarie University, Charles Sturt University, the Australian National University, University of Canberra, University Technology Sydney (UTS), and the universities of Wollongong, Tasmania, Charles Darwin, Federation, James Cook, Southern Queensland, Griffith, La Trobe and Swinburne.

These cuts have especially targeted arts and humanities, as one means of stultifying critical and historically-informed thinking.

This is part of a broader global transformation of universities. For example, the Starmer Labour government in the UK is presiding over the elimination of 5,000 university jobs, also driven by international student cuts. The Trump White House is threatening to defund universities that do not silence opposition to the US-Israeli Gaza genocide and align with Trump's fascist and militarist agenda.

The Albanese government also advised universities to comply with a Trump administration questionnaire

threatening to cut off joint funding for research unless their projects served the needs of US foreign policy and military objectives. At least 11 universities have suffered research funding cuts as a result, which will mean deeper job losses.

University workers want to fight the job cuts. At WSU, an online meeting of NTEU members on July 3 voted by 99 percent for stoppages of up to 24 hours and by 78 percent for indefinite strikes against the management's cost-cutting plans.

But the NTEU officials kept this vote tied to seeking to negotiate another enterprise agreement deal with WSU management, which could take months, and opposed a call by WSU Rank-and-File Committee member Michael Head for a unified campaign across the universities.

Both the NTEU and CPSU are silent on the fact that, while starving the universities of funds, the government is pouring billions of dollars into military spending, and backing the Gaza genocide, the criminal attacks on Iran and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

The Labor government, like the Trump administration, is also seeking to suppress opposition to the ethnic cleansing in Palestine. Education Minister Jason Clare personally instigated moves to freeze the research grant of Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah, a prominent critic of the Israeli war machine, at Macquarie University.

As a joint WSU and Macquarie Rank-and-File Committee statement, issued on June 24, 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.

To discuss and develop this fight, we will host an online public meeting this Saturday, August 2 at 3 p.m., titled "What is driving the university job cuts across Australia? Labor's pro-corporate and war agenda."

To join the meeting, please register here.

To support this campaign, contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators' rank-and-file network.

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

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