

Australia: Unions agree to facilitate sweeping job cuts at Western Sydney University

WSU Rank-and-File Committee member

17 August 2025

The two main Australian campus trade unions have reached a deal with Western Sydney University (WSU) vice-chancellor George Williams to help impose widespread job destruction.

The only proviso is that the management abide by the cosmetic “change proposal” clauses in the unions’ enterprise bargaining agreement with the university.

Williams hailed the agreement in an all-staff email last Friday, saying it would achieve the management’s goal of axing up to 300 jobs (more than 10 percent of the full-time workforce). He reported that this was the result of “constructive conversations with the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and Commonwealth Public Sector Union (CPSU).”

The job cuts at WSU are part of a wave of retrenchments and associated pro-corporate restructuring being inflicted throughout Australia’s 39 public universities under the federal Labor government. The NTEU admitted last week that by its own limited estimates, 3,578 jobs are being destroyed.

Nevertheless, the union leaders have opposed any unified struggle by staff and students against this assault, which is also depriving students of course choices, especially in arts and humanities, as one means of deadening critical and historically-informed thinking.

The NTEU and the CPSU are absurdly trying to blame individual vice-chancellors for what is a nationwide offensive. They are covering up the underlying agenda of the Labor government, while seeking to strike deals with the same vice-chancellors to achieve their job cut and restructuring goals.

What is happening at WSU is warning of how far the unions will go in their collaboration with managements and the Labor government across the country, unless stopped by the formation of new organisations of struggle, that is rank-and-file committees, independent of the compliant union apparatuses.

As a result of the NTEU’s “conversations” at WSU, Williams said the management would incorporate its consideration of 381 applications for “voluntary redundancies” into “the formal change process for Reset Western.”

“Reset Western” is the title of the management’s further restructuring of the university to meet the demands of employers and the Labor government’s pro-business and pro-military agenda, set out in last year’s Universities Accord report.

Williams still refused to rule out forced retrenchments if the required job cuts were not achieved by these “voluntary” means, that is by staff members offering to quit because of the climate of fear and uncertainty.

In fact, Williams said the redundancy process would now be accelerated to complete by October the selection of staff members to be terminated, after going through a nominal “consultation” period with the unions and targeted employees.

NTEU WSU branch president David Burchell was equally enthusiastic in an email to NTEU members last Thursday. He said he was “pleased to report” a “broadly constructive and positive” meeting with Williams. The result “marks a significant turning-point in this year’s turmoils—when an element of decency and stability has been imposed on what has been a chaotic process.”

By “decency and stability,” Burchell means an orderly, not “chaotic,” process for achieving the management’s job destruction target, that is without any industrial action. It is a signal of a partnership with management to stifle opposition and resistance to the avalanche of job elimination at WSU and nationally.

Burchell said NTEU representatives had met with Williams “in an effort to avert potential industrial disputation over the change process.” In other words, the union’s focus was on preventing any industrial action that could disrupt or defeat the attack on jobs.

This was after two overwhelming votes by WSU NTEU members for such action, which were indications of the wider desire by university workers everywhere to find ways to fight the job destruction.

On July 3, WSU NTEU members voted at an online meeting 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.

On August 7, another online members’ meeting voted for the NTEU branch committee to “consider our options for industrial disputation in relation to the University’s ‘voluntary redundancy’ program, to ensure the process is carried out in accordance with the requirements of the Organisational Change

provisions of the Western Sydney enterprise agreements, unless the matter is resolved satisfactorily by the University within the next seven days.”

As is now clear, these motions were designed only to consummate a deal with the management, in order to head off calls by members for “industrial disputation.”

The NTEU earlier advised Williams to resort to a so-called “voluntary redundancy” program in order to wear down and stifle resistance. The NTEU proposed a “modest” voluntary redundancy “exercise” to cut jobs in “a decent and humane manner.”

The truth is that the “Organisational Change” clauses in the enterprise agreements offer little or no protection against retrenchments. All management has to claim is that the work of a targeted staff member is no longer required or can be accommodated within the workloads of remaining staff.

After a nominal three-week “consultation” period, targeted staff members can still be retrenched, if they are not offered “redeployment,” possibly at lower levels and wages. To ease their departure, the management will offer them counselling and “career transition services.”

Clause 46.22 of the academic EBA sums up the outcome: “The University will use retrenchment as a last resort. When retrenchment occurs, the University will make available career transition services to an agreed service level upon request by an affected ongoing Employee.”

The EBA also provides for a “spill and fill” competition between employees to be selected for any vacancies. Clause 46.33 states: “If there are 2 or more eligible Employees being considered for placement in a suitable new or vacant position in the new structure, placement will be determined using a merit-based selection process.”

Clause 47.26 indicates the end result: “If at the end of the redeployment period a displaced Employee is not redeployed, the Employee will be retrenched and entitled to” a retrenchment package that could add up to only about a maximum of 18 months’ pay for the most long-serving employees.

According to Burchell’s email: “We understand there will be nine separate change proposals—one for each Division and Faculty.” This dovetails with the “Reset Western” restructuring scheme, which will slash jobs, particularly for professional staff.

Division, faculty and school heads are known to be finalising lists identifying staff members to be prioritised for retrenchments, whether “voluntary” or otherwise.

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 latest assault is being driven by the Labor government’s reactionary agenda to transform tertiary education.

This agenda features sharp cuts to international student

enrolments, on which the chronically underfunded universities have relied for fee revenue. Labor is also continuing the previous Liberal-National government’s “Job-ready Graduates” program, which has set punishing fees on domestic arts, humanities and social sciences students, while cutting university revenues for these courses.

The Albanese government is financially pressuring universities into transforming themselves along the lines of Labor’s Universities Accord, which demands that 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.

From next year, university funding will be tied to “mission” compacts, signed with a new government-appointed Australian Tertiary Education Commission, to deliver such outcomes.

In announcing the WSU retrenchment scheme last month, Williams 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.

On August 2, the WSU and Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committees convened an online public meeting to fight for a unified campaign against the Albanese government’s job cuts and the underlying pro-corporate, pro-military reshaping of tertiary education.

To discuss and develop rank-and-file committees to take up this essential fight, contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators’ rank-and-file network.

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