

# Australian university union admits to over 3,500 job cuts

Mike Head

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For the first time, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) leadership last week publicly acknowledged something of the scale of the job losses being inflicted on university workers across Australia.

“Cost-cutting universities are sacking 3,578 staff nationally, new data reveals,” the *Australian* newspaper reported last Friday, based on comments made to it by NTEU national president Alison Barnes. The job cuts since last year were across 18 universities.

The article stated that the union “estimates 1,114 looming cuts at the Australian National University, 400 at both Western Sydney University and the University of Technology Sydney, 272 at the University of Southern Queensland, 276 at the University of Wollongong and 200 at the University of Canberra.”

This is only a partial list. As previously reported by the *World Socialist Web Site*, the job destruction list also includes Sydney’s Macquarie University, Charles Sturt University and the universities of Newcastle, Tasmania, Charles Darwin, Federation, James Cook, Griffith, La Trobe and Swinburne.

The NTEU is still playing down the magnitude of the cuts. Evidently based on Barnes’ comments, the newspaper reported that the losses would account for 2.5 percent of academic, research and administrative jobs in the sector.

That is a vast understatement. At some of the country’s 39 public universities, the announced job losses go far deeper, exceeding 10 percent at Western Sydney University (WSU), for example.

In another instance, the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) management has just suspended nearly a fifth of its courses, despite protests by staff and students. After earlier announcing it will cut as many as 400 jobs, or about a tenth of the workforce, UTS has stopped new enrolments for 120 courses, across faculties including business, law, engineering and IT, health and science, notably targeting international studies.

Just four years ago, around 500 UTS staff lost their jobs during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the NTEU volunteered job and salary cuts and suppressed opposition throughout the university sector.

Across the country, job cuts are continuing, regardless of protest rallies and demonstrations at many individual universities.

In recent weeks alone, the University of Newcastle management announced, via an all-staff email, cost-cutting of at least \$20.6 million this year. Previous modelling indicates that could mean up to 400 job losses. Staff members at the university told the media

that the cuts were like “Hunger Games,” because they are forced to compete against each other for remaining positions.

At the Australian National University (ANU), the management has just revealed that security, cleaning and maintenance services would make up the next stage of its job cuts, following several rounds of academic retrenchments.

To add insult to injury, the ANU management released a draft “psychosocial risk assessment” outlining the potential impacts of its restructuring on staff wellbeing. The “hazards” included job insecurity, higher job demands, lack of role clarity, poor support and conflict between colleagues, clients and students.

These retrenchments are first and foremost a direct result of the Albanese government’s reactionary cuts to enrolments by overseas students. Their exorbitant fees have helped prop up the chronically-underfunded universities for the past decade and a half since the Rudd-Gillard Labor government’s funding cuts and market-driven “education revolution.”

The Labor government is deliberately applying financial pressure to the universities, in order to align them with the “national priorities” set out in last year’s Universities Accord report. That report insisted that both teaching and research must focus on serving the needs of the corporate elite, as well as the development of a war economy, including the AUKUS military pact and military-related industries, in preparation for a US-led war against China.

Yet in her comments to the *Australian*, Barnes again attributed this nationwide assault to individual university vice-chancellors, deliberately obscuring the role of the Labor government. She said the job losses were “completely unjustified” in almost every case, attacking vice-chancellors for blaming Labor’s caps on international student enrolments.

Barnes claimed that “almost every university” was in operating surplus, and criticised the high salaries of university executives, with vice-chancellors “taking home an average of \$1 million a year.”

But these lucrative remuneration packages simply embody the transformation of universities into corporate entities serving the training and research needs of the ruling class, a process that the Albanese government is taking to a new level. Labor’s agenda has five main components:

- Imposing sharp cuts to international student enrolments, making them scapegoats for the ongoing housing affordability crisis affecting working-class households, and stoking anti-

immigrant poison.

- Continuing the previous Liberal-National government’s “Job-ready Graduates” program, which has set punishing fees on domestic arts, humanities, social sciences and law students, while also cutting university revenues for these courses.

- Advising universities and researchers to comply with a Trump administration questionnaire threatening to cut off joint funding for research unless their projects serve the needs of US foreign policy and military objectives. At least 11 universities have suffered research funding cuts as a result.

- Implementing the Universities Accord, which demands that universities must restructure to satisfy the profit needs of big business and the development of war-related industries, such as the \$368 billion AUKUS plan to acquire or build nuclear-powered attack submarines.

- Tying university funding, from next year, to “mission” compacts, signed with a new government-appointed Australian Tertiary Education Commission, to deliver the required outcomes.

The Labor government, like the Trump administration, is also seeking to suppress opposition by staff and students to the US-backed Israeli mass murder in Palestine. Education Minister Jason Clare personally instigated moves to freeze the research grant of Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah, a prominent critic of the genocide, at Macquarie University.

Far from opposing Labor’s agenda, the NTEU and the other main campus trade union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), have formed a virtual partnership with the government to support its restructuring agenda, while blaming individual university chiefs for the resulting job and course cuts.

A June 25 NTEU media statement hailed Clare, who is spearheading Labor’s assault, for referring “serious governance concerns at ANU to regulator TEQSA [Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency].”

In the press release, NTEU president Barnes praised Clare’s “unprecedented intervention” as “a watershed moment in the NTEU’s campaign to fix the disgraceful governance crisis that has engulfed our public universities.” She called for new national and state legislation to “pull these rogue university executives into line so we can provide world-class research and teaching.”

The real purpose of such legislation would be to enforce Labor’s pro-corporate and pro-military refashioning of the universities, as well as its crackdown on anti-genocide dissent. The Albanese government and Jillian Segal, its “Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism in Australia,” have slandered any opposition to the Zionist state and its crimes as antisemitic.

The NTEU and CPSU leaderships have opposed any unified struggle by staff and students against this assault. At the same time, as has just happened at WSU, they are seeking deals with vice-chancellors to assist them to achieve their job-cutting and restructuring goals, mainly through “voluntary” retrenchment packages, as the unions have done for decades.

Labor’s offensive is in line with a worldwide pro-corporate and pro-war transformation of universities. In the UK, for example, the Starmer Labour government is presiding over the elimination of what is now estimated to be as many as 20,000 university jobs, including via “voluntary redundancies” and hiring freezes, also

reinforced by international student cuts.

To defeat this assault requires the formation of new organisations of struggle, that is rank-and-file committees, independent of the corporatist trade union apparatuses. The WSU and Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committees recently convened an online public meeting to fight for a unified campaign against Labor’s job cuts and the underlying reshaping of tertiary education.

Rank-and-file committees are needed to link up with workers in Australia and globally 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 capitalist governments and the corporate elite. These demands could include:

- Halt and reverse the thousands of job cuts and the resulting skyrocketing workloads

- Stop the cuts to international student enrolments

- End the victimisation of Randa Abdel-Fattah and other academics who oppose the genocide in Gaza

- Free first-class education for all students instead of channelling billions of dollars into preparations for US-led wars.

This is part of the broader struggle for a socialist perspective, against capitalism itself and its agenda of war and a relentless assault on the working class and democratic rights.

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.

**Contact the CFPE:**

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: CFPE\_Australia

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/poseaeusellout



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