

Australia: Western Sydney University announces deep job cuts after deal with unions

WSU Rank-and-File Committee member
25 August 2025

After months of threatening to do so, management at Western Sydney University (WSU), one of Australia's largest and predominantly working-class universities, this week formally announced the destruction of nearly 250 jobs—almost 10 percent of its workforce.

In an all-staff email on Monday, WSU vice-chancellor George Williams said 238 jobs would be eliminated overall, with a vague "aim" of achieving about 70 percent of that cut via "voluntary redundancies" or "VRs."

The true figure is higher than 238. Williams stated that more staff members would be affected by having their positions "disestablished," which basically means they will be forced to compete with their colleagues for reclassified jobs, possibly at lower grades and wages.

Significantly, Williams made the announcement shortly after reaching an agreement with the campus trade unions to head off votes by their members for industrial action and to help impose the cuts via cosmetic "organisational change proposals" in union-management enterprise bargaining agreements.

Williams had earlier reported that this plan was the result of "constructive conversations with the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU)." On August 14, the NTEU's WSU branch president David Burchell equally enthusiastically hailed the deal struck with Williams.

In an email to NTEU members, Burchell said he was "pleased to report" a "broadly constructive and positive" meeting with Williams. The result, Burchell wrote, "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 meant a process for achieving management's job destruction target without any industrial action. 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, which NTEU members had previously overwhelmingly voted for, that could disrupt or defeat the attack on jobs. This was a signal of a partnership with management to stifle opposition and resistance to the job elimination at WSU and nationally.

The job destruction at WSU and accompanying "Reset Western" pro-business restructuring is typical of what is happening under the Albanese Labor government throughout Australia's 39 public universities, where the NTEU recently admitted, at least 3,500 jobs are currently being eliminated.

All up, the WSU management will accept 251 VRs out of the 381 applications made for them—a process which the NTEU also suggested as a means of stifling opposition to the mass retrenchments.

Williams claimed that the required cuts to academic posts could be achieved by VRs, but the administrative and support staff would suffer forced redundancies. He said he was "sorry" about this, but "the voluntary redundancy applications from professional staff did not line up with the proposed organisational redesign."

The details of the people and roles to be axed will not be known until later in the week, after the targeted staff members are summoned for meetings with their supervisors.

Any final information about the scale and impact of the cuts will be released only after the end of a token three-week "consultation" period with the unions and affected staff members, as per the enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs) with the NTEU and the CPSU.

The "Organisational Change" clauses in the union EBAs offer little or no protection against retrenchments. The management only has to assert that the work of a targeted staff member is no longer required or can be accommodated within the workloads of remaining staff.

The EBAs also provide for a "spill and fill" competition between employees for any vacancies. Clause 46.33 of the NTEU's academic EBA at WSU 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.”

In an attempt to justify the cuts, Williams cited both an anticipated “operating deficit of \$74.5 million in 2026” and a need to “help Western better deliver on our mission.” As he outlined in his email message, this “mission” features satisfying the narrow vocational demands of employers, rather than providing students with any broader and critical educational experience.

In Williams’ words, this means: “Consolidating our work around careers, employability, work integrated learning and placements to better support our students’ employability and to enable us to scale up opportunities for industry experience.”

Williams said the restructuring “through Reset Western” would “align with our bold new strategy, WESTERN 2030.” That blueprint, which involves dragging all the academic schools into three huge faculties, seeks to further transform the university along corporate lines.

A WSU media statement revealed nervousness about the response of staff and students, despite the deal with the unions. It said the institution was expecting “some tough and challenging weeks” ahead as the retrenchment process was undertaken.

Without naming the Labor government, the statement also alluded to the pressures that the government is applying to the universities. It said: “Our financial challenges are due to range of factors including international student caps, increased competition for students from Western Sydney, declining revenue per student because of the Job-ready Graduates package, cost-of-living pressures, and changing student behaviours. Many of these pressures are sector wide.”

Labor’s 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 of \$50,000 or more on domestic arts, humanities and social sciences students, while cutting university revenues for these courses.

The Albanese government is pushing the universities into compliance with Labor’s Universities Accord, released last year. It 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.

None of the resulting job destruction or pro-corporate restructuring would be possible without the support of the union apparatuses, which agree with its underlying thrust.

As at WSU, the NTEU and the CPSU are trying to blame individual vice-chancellors for what is a nationwide offensive, even while seeking to deals with the same university chiefs to achieve their job cut and restructuring goals.

The developments at WSU show how far the union leaders will go in their partnership with managements and the Labor government across the country. This must be stopped by the formation of new organisations of struggle, that is rank-and-file committees, independent of the compliant union apparatuses.

The WSU Rank-and-File Committee calls for this offensive to be opposed by staff and students everywhere and throughout the working class. We say:

Halt and reverse the thousands of job cuts and the resulting sky-rocketing workloads

Stop the cuts to international student enrolments

- 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 attacks on the working class and democratic rights.

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

We urge staff and students to contact us to take up this essential fight, via 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](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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