

# Labor's job cuts intensify in Australian universities

A WSU Rank-and-File Committee member

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Recent developments throughout Australia's 39 public universities show the necessity for staff and students to establish independent rank-and-file committees to lead a unified struggle against the job cuts and pro-corporate restructuring taking place under the Albanese Labor government.

Up to 4,000 jobs are being destroyed, along with hundreds of student courses, especially in humanities, while the campus trade unions assist Labor's reshaping of tertiary education to satisfy the profit needs of employers and in preparation for war.

Among the developments over the past week:

At Western Sydney University (WSU), it was revealed that around 750 positions and roles have been "disestablished," but only about 300 corresponding roles are proposed in the new structure. That means that about a third of the workforce, especially the professional staff, are being affected, and often forced to compete against each other, *Hunger Games*-style, for jobs.

At the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), SafeWork NSW gave the go-ahead for a sped-up timeline of job destruction, on the pretext of avoiding further "serious and imminent risk of psychological harm." That shattered the claim by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) that it had won a reprieve by referring the looming 400 job cuts to SafeWork NSW.

More job losses were announced at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and Southern Cross University, taking the national total of job cuts in the past 10 months to close to 4,000.

Over the past year, the two main unions covering university workers, the NTEU and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), have tried to block every call by the rank-and-file committees at WSU and Macquarie University (MQ) for unified action against the cuts.

The union officials are covering up the underlying agenda of the Labor government by trying to blame mismanagement by individual vice-chancellors for the disaster unfolding across the entire sector.

Not a word is being said about the fact that the Albanese government is spending hundreds of billions of dollars on military spending and developing a war economy, including via the AUKUS pact against China, while intensifying the financial pressure on the universities to restructure to align with the "national priorities" set out in its Universities Accord in 2024.

That report insisted that teaching and research must serve the requirements of the corporate elite and the development of AUKUS and other military-related industries, in preparation for involvement in a US-led war against China.

The unions are assisting the university managements to implement the restructuring. They are helping push people out the door, either via so-called voluntary redundancies or the cosmetic "consultation" processes in the union enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs) with the managements, which offer little or no protection against retrenchments.

Despite rallies and protests, and overwhelming votes for strikes at individual universities, the union apparatuses have isolated educators at each institution and not called a single stoppage anywhere.

The unions are trying to stifle the anger by straitjacketing university workers within the anti-strike legislation that the unions themselves helped draft under the Hawke-Keating and Rudd-Gillard governments of 1983–1996 and 2007–2013.

At meeting after meeting, union representatives are telling university workers they cannot take any industrial action, except for EBAs during union-controlled bargaining periods.

At WSU, the NTEU is working closely with Vice-Chancellor George Williams. First, it advised him to use "voluntary redundancies," and then to implement the restructuring through the cosmetic consultation provisions in the existing EBA.

In an email last Friday, NTEU branch president David Burchell urged union members to "roll up our collective sleeves, folks!" to participate in this consultation circus, even after revealing the 750 job "disestablishment" total.

This Monday, after the sham of this process became

obvious, Burchell sent a letter to Williams asking him to halt it and “commence afresh,” saying: “We’re happy to meet and discuss how best to achieve the goal of a safe and effective change process.”

At other locations, like MQ, the unions are trapping staff in appeals to the Fair Work Australia tribunal for alleged breaches of consultation processes. This tribunal, like SafeWork NSW, is not a neutral body. It is an institution of the capitalist state apparatus, whose role is to contain and suppress the opposition of workers.

No doubt, the job and course closures are causing trauma at UTS, as WorkSafe NSW admitted, but that is because the unions are trying to wear down and suffocate the resistance of workers.

At UTS, there is outrage because the management has stopped new enrolments for nearly a fifth of its courses—notably in international studies, social sciences, education and public health—and threatened to sack about a tenth of the workforce.

At least 20 of the 39 public universities have unveiled similar attacks, in one form or another, in the past 10 months.

What the unions and their pseudo-left partners, like Socialist Alternative, Socialist Alliance and Solidarity, are trying to hide is that this is a direct consequence of Labor’s reactionary cuts to enrolments of overseas students, especially Chinese students.

The unions do not oppose the attack on international students because they agree with Labor’s nationalist program, which includes falsely blaming these students, and immigrants, for the affordable housing and cost-of-living crisis affecting millions of working-class households.

Universities have relied on charging overseas students exorbitant fees to overcome the shortfall in funding inflicted by successive Liberal-National and Greens-backed Labor governments. Universities Australia, the employers’ group, reported last year that funding for universities had fallen in real terms by \$2 billion since 2020 alone.

Labor is intensifying the financial pressure on universities by continuing the previous Liberal-National government’s “Job-ready Graduates” scheme that hiked the cost of three-year humanities degrees to more than \$50,000, while cutting the funding to universities for delivering them.

From next January 1, this process will intensify further. Each university’s funding will be tied to a “mission-based compact” with the government’s new Australian Tertiary Education Commission to lay down how the university will contribute to “national priorities.”

Opposition exists throughout the universities to the job destruction, course closures, restructuring and the suppression of dissent, including over the Gaza genocide.

But the NTEU and CPSU leaders are promoting a Labor-Greens-majority Senate committee inquiry into “university governance.” NTEU national president Alison Barnes this week claimed in an email to NTEU members that the union had secured “another major win” after testifying at the inquiry.

Barnes said the government had announced that the university regulator, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), would get increased powers to “crack down on out of control university managements.” Any such powers will be used to enforce Labor’s agenda, not oppose it.

University staff, along with students, need to break out of this straitjacket. We are calling for the formation of rank-and-file committees (RFCs), independent of the unions, at every university.

We need to form organisations of struggle to fight for demands based on the educational and financial needs of students and staff, not the dictates of the Labor government, the financial markets and the war machine.

RFCs can link up with workers everywhere and with our Educators Rank-and-File Committee colleagues in the US, where the Trump administration is demolishing public education, through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

To discuss forming RFCs, 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



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