

Australia: As anger mounts, unions assist job destruction at Western Sydney University

A WSU Rank-and-File Committee member

24 September 2025

A National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members' meeting at Western Sydney University (WSU) last Thursday revealed widespread anger and dismay over the elimination of hundreds of jobs, with many staff members being forced to compete against each other for reclassified positions.

The meeting also demonstrated how far union officials are going to trap university workers in the sham "consultation" processes in enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs) and oppose any unified fight against the estimated 4,000 job losses throughout Australia's 39 public universities.

During the meeting, the fraud of WSU's "change proposal" consultation became glaring. Many people reported receiving demeaning treatment and being forced to reapply for their jobs. Multiple Q&A sessions in different faculties and departments had proved to be an insult, with questions unanswered and management refusing to provide responses.

There were multiple stories in the online meeting and the zoom chat about the trauma being created by the arbitrary process, with management's dictates sometimes changing in the middle of the three-week token consultation period, reversing previous assurances of individual job security.

In a typical comment, one member said the process was "flawed." Another spoke about the psychologically unsafe conditions being created by the uncertainty and stress. Others said people feared making submissions because they anticipated management retribution.

Nevertheless, NTEU branch president David Burchell implored members to just keep sending feedback to the union so it could make final "change consultation" submissions before management's deadline last Friday.

This is under conditions where around 750 positions and roles have been "disestablished," but only about 300 corresponding roles proposed in the new WSU structure. About a third of the workforce, especially professional staff members, are being affected.

This disaster is the result of the NTEU's own advice to management to impose its cuts via "voluntary redundancies" and the cosmetic "change process" in the union-

management EBAs.

A previous online meeting of WSU NTEU members on July 3 voted by 99 percent for stoppages of up to 24 hours and by 78 percent for indefinite strikes against management's cost-cutting plans.

But the NTEU officials kept this vote tied to seeking to negotiate another EBA 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.

Last month, the NTEU and the other main campus union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), struck a deal with WSU vice chancellor George Williams to halt any plans for industrial action, in return for management utilising the EBA "change process" to achieve its cost-cutting target.

Williams reported that this deal was the result of "constructive conversations" with the two unions. On August 14, the NTEU's Burchell enthusiastically hailed the pact. In an email to NTEU members, Burchell said he was "pleased to report" that "an element of decency and stability has been imposed on what has been a chaotic process."

As the WSU Rank-and-File Committee warned, by "decency and stability," Burchell meant a process for achieving management's jobs cut 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. This was a signal of a partnership with management to stifle opposition to the job destruction at WSU and nationally.

On September 9, assured of the unions' cooperation, Williams dismissed their last-minute requests to halt and restart the "change process," the fraud of which had become increasingly obvious to WSU workers. He insisted that management was "on track" to rapidly issue its final "change plans" by October 3.

At last Thursday's members' meeting, NTEU senior industrial officer Joshua Garva backed Burchell, declaring

that it was important to enforce “good” EBA conditions. In reality, the EBA “Organisational Change” clauses offer little or no protection against retrenchments. 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 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.”

Burchell said the NTEU was placing the dispute in the hands of the Fair Work Commission (FWC), the federal Labor government’s pro-employer industrial tribunal. That is a well-worn means of unions tying workers up in the capitalist courts, further blocking industrial action.

Garva claimed that the union had achieved a “huge victory” at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra by forcing the resignation of its vice chancellor. But ANU’s replacement interim vice chancellor stated that management had already achieved its job cutting target, making further forced retrenchments unnecessary. Nearly 1,100 staff have been forced out since last year.

Garva’s claim was just as false as the NTEU’s earlier boast of securing a reprieve from the looming 400 job cuts at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) after SafeWork NSW initially ordered a pause to prevent “psychological harm.” SafeWork NSW reversed that pause within days, giving a green light for a sped-up timeline of job destruction.

The job elimination at WSU is typical of what is happening under the Albanese Labor government throughout the university sector.

The government is spending hundreds of billions of dollars on the military, including via the AUKUS pact against China, while intensifying the financial pressure on the universities to restructure to align with the underlying war agenda and other “national priorities” set out in last year’s Universities Accord report.

That financial pressure includes slashing international student enrolments and 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 January 1, each university’s funding will be tied to a “mission-based compact” with the government’s new Australian Tertiary Education Commission to contribute to “national priorities.”

Led by Williams and Chancellor Jennifer Westacott, a

former Business Council of Australia CEO, WSU management is seeking to meet Labor’s demands through a “Western 2030 Strategic Plan.”

University staff and students have to break out of the union straitjacket by forming rank-and-file committees (RFCs), independent of the unions, to fight for their educational and financial needs, not the dictates of the Labor government, the financial markets and the war machine.

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

As outlined at an online public meeting last month, the WSU and Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committees are calling for a unified campaign throughout the working class against the job cuts and pro-corporate, pro-military reshaping of tertiary education. 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.

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



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact