

Australian university union backs Labor's education restructuring

A WSU Rank-and-File Committee member
23 October 2025

The Committee for Public Education and International Youth and Students for Social Equality have called an urgent public meeting, in Sydney and online, for October 26 to discuss how to fight Labor's university restructuring and job cuts. Click here to register now.

Two developments over the past week have shown how far the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) officials are going to try to suffocate resistance to the federal Labor government's pro-corporate and pro-military restructuring of universities, and the accompanying destruction of some 4,000 jobs nationally.

The first was a NTEU members' meeting last week at my university, the Western Sydney University (WSU), where anger and frustration erupted for the second time in the recent period.

Almost 200 jobs are being eliminated at WSU and about 500 further staff members in "disestablished" positions are being forced to compete against each other for new jobs that the management considers "suitable" for them.

This is the result of a deal struck with the university management by the NTEU and the other main campus union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), to assist the management by allowing its "Western Sydney Reset" restructuring to go ahead.

On October 2, WSU vice-chancellor and president George Williams sent an all-staff email thanking both unions for their "goodwill and constructive engagement" in ending a dispute over the restructuring. "This means that our change process will now proceed and is back on track," he wrote.

As a result, about a quarter of the university's staff members are being retrenched or displaced, and serious damage is being done to the education quality, course options and futures of students.

At last week's meeting, David Burchell, the NTEU's WSU branch president, admitted that displaced staff members were being told by their managers to apply for multiple jobs—up to five or ten. Participants in the meeting spoke of being "freaked out" by the demand.

Others reported "mistakes" in the listings of disestablished and new roles in the proposed structures, adding to the trauma and uncertainty. Some voiced concerns that people were being placed in jobs they did not want, as a means of driving them out

of the university.

Academics said teaching workloads would be increased by 20 to 30 percent for those in previous governance roles within schools that were being amalgamated into one of the three giant faculties being established.

Burchell made unsuccessful efforts to reassure everyone that they were entitled to a "suitable" job under the unions' agreement with Williams. In reality, "suitable" means whatever the management decides serves the restructuring operation.

This was a week after Burchell had anti-democratically blocked debate and bulldozed a resolution through a hastily-called online members' meeting to endorse the NTEU sellout, despite considerable opposition.

Parallel processes are underway throughout the country's 39 public universities, mostly targeting critical disciplines such as history, anthropology, sociology, drama and music, as well as some maths and science courses. This is depriving students of broader choices in terms of their courses, careers and lives.

As at other universities, the "Western Sydney Reset" is designed to service the teaching and research requirements of the corporate elite, including the military industries, particularly at the expense of arts and humanities.

In the words of Williams in launching the WESTERN 2030 strategic plan in July, it aims to make WSU "the 'go-to' university for industry." That is in line with the Labor government's 2024 Universities Accord report, which insisted that universities must focus both their teaching and research on meeting the needs of business and the AUKUS military plan for war against China.

The NTEU has opposed any unified action by university staff and students against this offensive, instead isolating protests and struggles at individual universities and trying to blame "mismanagement" by vice-chancellors for the devastating job cuts, in order to deflect attention away from the Labor government.

In this context, the other revealing development was an October 20 email to all NTEU members by NTEU national president Alison Barnes, saying she was "excited to share some historic news."

Amid the biggest assault on university jobs since the start of the COVID pandemic, when the NTEU played a similar

treacherous role, Barnes insisted that the same Labor government that presided over that disaster had now promised to deliver “real university governance reform.”

Barnes’ “historic news” was based on an October 18 media release by Education Minister Jason Clare in which he said the Albanese government would adopt a “new set of university governance principles” recommended by its own handpicked Expert Council on University Governance.

These “principles” are in fact designed to facilitate the university restructuring demanded by Labor’s Universities Accord. The Expert Council began its report by citing the Accord and “the sharp focus on the need to lift productivity and innovation in Australia.”

Barnes claimed that the one of the great gains would be “Vice-chancellor salary reform—a new remuneration framework will essentially cap outrageous pay packets.” That is a hoax. The report proposed that university executive salaries be “more closely aligned to or informed by external public sector benchmarks.”

Many of the salaries of government department heads and public sector CEOs exceed \$1 million, just as some vice-chancellor’s salaries do.

The Expert Council itself consisted of three government appointees— Committee for Economic Development of Australia CEO Melinda Cilento (chair), ex-Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) president Sharan Burrow and corporate lawyer Bruce Cowley—plus representatives of various university management, regulators and business groups.

The Labor government is restructuring tertiary education to align with “national priorities,” that is, to satisfy the dictates of big business and develop a war economy, notably through the AUKUS pact against China.

The Accord report nominated “areas of national priority like clean energy, critical technology, minerals and defence,” saying they “will need more skilled professionals.” These fields are all connected to the geo-strategic interests of Australian imperialism and its commitment to US war plans.

That central thrust was highlighted by a recent speech by ex-Labor minister and union leader Bill Shorten, now a university vice-chancellor. He called for the “fundamental reimagining” of universities as a “core instrument of our national power” under conditions of global instability and war.

Shorten proposed replacing many university degrees with a “modular system” of mini qualifications “to produce the thousands of nuclear engineers, cyber specialists, and AI technicians that the AUKUS enterprise demands, at a pace that matches the urgency of our strategic environment.”

The Albanese government is applying intensive financial pressure on the universities to restructure along such lines, including by slashing enrolments by international students. Labor is also maintaining 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.

We have called an urgent public meeting, in Sydney and online, this Sunday, October 26 to discuss how to fight this historic offensive and its enforcement by the trade union apparatuses. [Click here to register now.](#)

The meeting has been convened by the rank-and-file committees at WSU and Macquarie University, the Committee for Public Education (CFPE)—the educators’ rank-and-file network—and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party.

Sunday’s public meeting will discuss the connection between these developments in Australia and what is happening internationally, particularly the ideological refashioning of universities and the entire education system by the fascistic Trump administration in the United States.

This month the White House sent a letter to universities, titled the “Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education,” demanding that they advance the “national interests and priorities of the U.S. government” or be defunded.

Sunday’s meeting will discuss the need to develop rank-and-file committees (RFCs) as the new forms of organisation of the working class. Committees of university workers and students can elaborate and fight for demands based on their interests, and those of high-quality education, not the dictates of the corporate elites and their parliamentary and trade union agents.

Through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), they can link up with the educators’ RFCs in the US and elsewhere, and with workers in every industry worldwide, in the fight against capitalism itself.

To discuss these critical issues and how to form RFCs, join our public meeting on Sunday October 26. You can register [here](#).

Public meeting:

Oppose Labor’s “national priorities” university restructuring and job cuts

12pm (AEDT), Sunday October 26

Boronia Grove Community Centre

40 Victoria St Epping, NSW

and online via Zoom.



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