

# Australia: Union calls a belated strike ballot at Western Sydney University

A WSU Rank-and-File Committee member

3 November 2025

After a four-month delay—during which the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) struck a deal with management to allow its pro-business restructuring to go ahead at the expense of nearly 200 jobs—the union has called an industrial action ballot at Western Sydney University (WSU).

The NTEU reported last Thursday that the Fair Work Commission, which is the Labor government's pro-business industrial tribunal, had quickly approved holding an online "Protected Action Ballot" of the NTEU branch members, to be rushed through from Monday to Friday this week.

This is first and foremost a manoeuvre to head off anger over the destruction of jobs and conditions as the result of the union's sellout on the restructuring. As well as the almost 200 jobs being eliminated, about 500 staff members in "disestablished" positions are now being forced to compete against each other for other jobs that the management considers "suitable" for them.

While advocating a "yes" vote on the ballot questions, the WSU Rank-and-File Committee warns that the NTEU is seeking such a vote for the purpose of negotiating yet another treacherous deal, this time for a new union-management enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA).

In fact, the NTEU branch president David Burchell has sent emails to members emphasising that a Protected Action Ballot is a vote to "authorise" forms of industrial action, not to actually take action.

The aim, according to Burchell, is to give the NTEU bargaining team "new impetus to further improve our rights and conditions" in talks with management. This is a fraud.

The truth is that any new EBA will be just as useless in opposing the destruction of jobs and conditions as

the last one, imposed in 2022, has proved to be.

Despite Burchell repeatedly insisting that the existing EBA is already strong on job protection, its "Organisational Change" clauses offer little or no protection against retrenchments and displacements. 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 EBA provides 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."

It is now four months since an online meeting of NTEU members at WSU on July 3 voted by 99 percent for stoppages of up to 24 hours and by 78 percent for indefinite strikes against management's brutal restructuring blueprint.

That was a vote to fight the job destruction. But the NTEU officials kept the vote tied to seeking to negotiate yet another EBA with management. In addition, they vehemently opposed a call by WSU Rank-and-File Committee member Michael Head for a unified campaign across the universities against the ongoing elimination of up to 4,000 jobs nationally.

After that, the NTEU called off its dispute with management and struck a deal with Vice-Chancellor George Williams to let the "Western Sydney Reset" restructuring go ahead.

On October 2, Williams sent an all-staff email thanking both the NTEU and the other main campus union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), for their "goodwill and constructive engagement." He wrote: "This means that our change

process will now proceed and is back on track.”

Thanks to the “goodwill and constructive engagement” of the unions, about 700 of the university’s staff members—nearly a quarter of the workforce, and mostly professional staff—are being retrenched or displaced. At the same time, serious damage is being done to the education quality, course options and futures of students.

At an NTEU WSU members’ meeting last week, Burchell urged members to be “stoic” and “keep a sense of humour.” But a range of participants spoke or posted comments voicing outrage. One said it felt like people were being forced into “a version of Hunger Games.”

Others described the treatment of staff as “disgusting” and said the mood had shifted to anger.

As we discussed at our public meeting on October 26, this assault is part of a wider and deeper offensive against educators and students. The Albanese Labor government’s Universities Accord demands the transformation of the country’s 39 public universities, both in teaching and research, to align with “national priorities,” including the AUKUS military pact directed against China.

Led by Williams and Chancellor Jennifer Westacott, a former CEO of the Business Council of Australia, the WSU management is seeking to satisfy Labor’s requirements through the “Reset Western” program, driven by a “Western 2030 Strategic Plan” that aims to “attract partnerships and investment” to western Sydney from companies and governments.

The Albanese government is financially pressuring universities by cutting international student enrolments and continuing the previous Liberal-National government’s “Job-ready graduates” program, which sets exorbitant fees for humanities students, while cutting the funding for universities to deliver their courses.

Not accidentally, the university cuts have especially targeted arts and humanities, as one means of further stultifying critical and historically-informed thinking.

The Labor government also plans to tie university funding, from next year, to “mission-based compacts,” signed with a new government-appointed Australian Tertiary Education Commission, to contribute to “national priorities.”

This language is similar to that of the fascistic Trump

administration. 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.

Both the NTEU and CPSU are silent on the fact that, while starving the universities of funds, the Albanese government is pouring billions of dollars into military spending for AUKUS, while backing the Gaza genocide and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

The Labor government, like the Trump administration, is also seeking to suppress opposition to the ethnic cleansing in Palestine. Education Minister Jason Clare personally instigated moves to freeze the research grant of Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah, a prominent critic of the Israeli war machine, at Macquarie University.

Political conclusions must be drawn from these experiences about the role of the Labor government and the union apparatuses. We must develop rank-and-file committees (RFCs) as the new forms of organisation of the working class.

Democratically elected committees of university workers and students are needed to 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 servants.

Through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), we must link up with the educators’ RFCs in the US and elsewhere, and with workers in every industry worldwide in the fight for a socialist alternative.

We urge staff and students to contact us 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:

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