Australia: Staff members expose disastrous “Reset” at Western Sydney University

A WSU Rank-and-File Committee member
12 December 2025

During a National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) branch meeting at Western Sydney University on Thursday, professional staff members spoke about the extra workloads and other onerous conditions being imposed on them as a result of the management’s “Reset” restructuring.

On top of nearly 200 redundancies, about 720 jobs are being “disestablished” at the largely working-class university. Many of those being displaced—almost a quarter of the workforce—are being shunted into lower-paid positions, face higher workloads or are yet to be allocated alternative positions.

The comments made at the meeting provide a glimpse of what university workers and students are confronting, not just at WSU but across Australia, where some 4,000 jobs are being eliminated and courses are being cut, particularly in arts and humanities.

This is part of the federal Labor government’s reshaping of the entire tertiary education sector to cut costs and satisfy the teaching and research needs of the corporate elite, the AUKUS military pact and other preparations for war.

One participant reported that her team had been “smashed” by a half, with workloads more than doubled because of the abolished positions. In addition, she said, the management’s promised reskilling of workers to take new roles flew in the face of a similar cut to the professional development team. Now contractors had been brought in to do the “skills gap” training.

This provoked further comments, such as that “contractors are coming out of the weeds” and that people were being told to “absorb” the workloads of unfilled roles. Other members spoke of being only offered jobs in distant campuses or on lower pay.

Some staff were being told that the university had “run out of roles” for them, yet the management was advertising externally to fill positions.

At WSU, this offensive is only possible because the NTEU struck a deal to accept and assist the restructuring, despite two overwhelming votes by its members for industrial action.

On October 2, WSU vice-chancellor George Williams sent an all-staff email thanking both the NTEU and the other main campus trade union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), for their “goodwill and constructive engagement” in calling off a dispute over the restructuring. “This means that our change process will now proceed and is back on track,” he wrote.

Last week, Williams went further in another all-staff email, boasting that as a result, the management had achieved its goal of slashing almost $80 million from its annual budget “in a little over six months.”

Despite the destruction of jobs and conditions, the WSU NTEU branch president David Burchell told Thursday’s meeting that he was “more excited” by the prospect of finalising a new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) with the management than in any previous EBA round.

Burchell began the meeting by saying it had been a “catastrophic year.” But later he declared, “we got through it in one piece” and this was what “trade unions are for.” These comments not only displayed indifference to the fate of hundreds of staff members. Unwittingly, they underscored the essential role of the union apparatuses today in smothering the resistance of workers.

Burchell insisted that the NTEU had achieved a victory by getting a commitment from the management that all displaced staff members would be found “suitable” jobs. That claim flew in the face of the

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reality reported by members.

He said the union was close to an agreement on a new EBA, including on "change" clauses that would provide for consultation before further restructuring was conducted. Yet any new EBA will be just as useless in opposing the destruction of jobs and conditions as the current supposedly "strong" one, pushed through by the NTEU in 2022.

Burchell said he hoped the EBA would be finalised once negotiations resumed on January 20. That is a warning of preparations for another sellout deal, like the one struck on October 2.

WSU Rank-and-File Committee member Michael Head objected, speaking about "the elephant in the room"—that similar destructions of jobs and restructurings were taking place throughout the universities nationally.

He said the NTEU opposed any unified fight. Instead, it isolated struggles at individual universities and even falsely claimed "victories," like at WSU, Sydney University Technology and the Australian National University, after the managements secured their job-cutting targets by driving people out via supposed "voluntary" redundancies.

Before Burchell bureaucratically cut him off, Head said these attacks were all driven by the Albanese Labor government's agenda of austerity and war preparations.

The truth is that the NTEU and other unions support this agenda. The NTEU leadership has not voiced a word of objection to the Labor government's allocation of hundreds of billions of dollars to the AUKUS program and other military plans.

Nor has there been any opposition to the cutting of international student enrolments, the continued underfunding of universities, and the subordination of education to "national priorities," echoing those of the fascistic Trump administration.

From 2026, each university's funding will be tied to a "mission-based compact" with the government's new Australian Tertiary Education Commission to contribute to the "national priorities" such as AUKUS and critical minerals, which the Labor government has agreed to supply to the Trump administration.

The Labor government is also 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.

The role of the NTEU reflects the transformation of the trade unions internationally from defensive organisations of the working class, always within the framework of wage labour, into industrial policing agencies. In Australia, the anti-strike enterprise bargaining system was imposed by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the Hawke-Keating Labor governments in the 1980s and 1990s.

Just quitting the unions in disgust, as many have done, is not an answer. Staff and students must take matters into their own hands. For that, new democratic forms of organisation, independent rank-and-file committees (RFCs), must be built.

The WSU and Macquarie University RFCs are calling for a unified campaign throughout the working class against Labor's pro-corporate, pro-military reshaping of tertiary education.

This is part of a broader necessary struggle against capitalism itself and its program of ever-greater corporate wealth and turn to war and Trump-style dictatorial rule. It means a fight to reorganise society along genuinely democratic and egalitarian, that is socialist, lines in the interests of humanity, not the corporate ruling class.

To discuss, contact the WSU Rank-and-File Committee at rfc.wsu@gmail.com or the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators' network:

Contact the CFPE:

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