

Build rank-and-file committees at Australian universities to fight job destruction and pro-war restructuring

Committee for Public Education
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As educators and students return to Australian campuses in 2026, they confront convulsive events worldwide and an ongoing assault on jobs and conditions.

Spearheaded by the fascistic Trump administration, an eruption of militarism and domestic repression has shattered the post-World War II order and this is driving deeper attacks—led by the Albanese Labor government—throughout the universities.

In the first month of 2026 alone, Trump ordered the invasion of Venezuela to abduct its president, Nicolás Maduro, and seize the country's vast oil reserves; repeatedly threatened to wage war on Iran; demanded that Denmark, a European Union state and fellow NATO member, cede Greenland to the US; and threatened 100 percent tariffs against Canada.

Every imperialist government, including that of Labor in Australia, is responding to this global rupture by rearming, at the cost of hundreds of billions of dollars, and reorganising their economies—including the education systems—in preparation for potentially disastrous wars.

Already, over the past year, the managements at Australia's 39 public universities have eliminated almost 4,000 jobs nationally. This is the sharp edge of a pro-corporate and pro-military restructuring. It has been aided and abetted by both the campus trade union apparatuses—the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU)—which have opposed any unified action by staff and students across the country.

Definite conclusions must be drawn from these bitter experiences under the Labor government.

Despite outrage and opposition by staff and students, displayed in repeated protests, this offensive has been allowed to proceed, enabled by union deals featuring “voluntary redundancies” and sham “consultation” processes in union-management enterprise agreements.

The onslaught on jobs, accompanied by course closures, especially in humanities, and soaring workloads, can only be understood and fought by placing it squarely within a world wracked by the US-led imperialist military aggression and threats, staggering inequality, the rise of authoritarian rule and a global offensive against democratic rights to suppress rising working-class opposition.

The naked “America first” drive by the oligarchic Trump administration to restore US dominance after years of economic decline, above all against China but also at the expense of one-time US allies such as Canada and the European imperialist powers, threatens a catastrophic plunge into another world war.

Washington's war drive is the external expression of US and world

capitalism in crisis. At home it is accompanied by police militarisation, repudiation of democratic norms and the targeting of dissent, as seen in the ICE murders in Minneapolis of Renee Good and Alex Pretti for organising against the roundup, imprisonment and deportation of immigrant workers and their families.

Over the past year, the Trump administration has also gutted public education funding, and imposed mass public sector layoffs, censorship, book bans and a “patriotic curriculum” in schools and universities. Other governments are following suit.

The rise of general strike movements in Minneapolis and other US cities is historically significant. It shows the potential for a working-class uprising against the oligarchic capitalist class, not just in the US but internationally.

In Australia too, education funding is being weaponised to enforce political conformity and suppress critical thought and dissent.

Following the December 14 terrorist Bondi Beach massacre, the Albanese government established a witch-hunting “antisemitism education taskforce,” chaired by businessman David Gonski and Jillian Segal—the Labor government's Zionist “antisemitism envoy.”

This body poses a serious threat to democratic rights and academic freedom by equating political opposition, particularly to Israel's genocide in Gaza, with antisemitism, providing a framework for censorship, curriculum changes, victimisations and repression in schools and universities. Under the guise of combatting hatred, the Labor government also has introduced laws allowing for the banning of political groups by ministerial decree.

While allocating vast sums for AUKUS submarines and other weaponry directed against China, Labor is continuing to starve the universities of adequate funding, along with schools, hospitals, the NDIS and other social programs.

This is intensifying the deterioration of conditions in the universities over the past four decades—producing huge class sizes, the casualisation of the workforce and the ever-greater reliance on corporate funding and student fees, both domestic and international.

According to official statistics, federal funding for higher education has been declining since the 1970s, under Labor and Liberal-National governments alike. Funding per student has been slashed from around \$32,000 in 1974 to some \$12,000—a cut of about two-thirds.

Labor's continued financial squeeze, reinforced by reactionary nationalist cuts to international student enrolments, is aimed at compelling the universities to integrate themselves more fully with the demands of big business and the military, as set out in the government's Universities Accord.

The Accord insists that universities must transform both teaching and research in partnership with employers, and in line with the building of a war economy, including through the AUKUS pact, which is a preparation for a US-led war against China.

The Accord blueprint ties funding to universities signing “mission-based compacts” with Labor’s new Australian Tertiary Education Commission, above all to serve “national priorities” such as defence and critical minerals.

The Accord report specified “micro-credential” courses to meet the requirements of employers, along with “work integrated learning” and “degree apprenticeships,” including AUKUS apprenticeships. Hundreds of such courses are being rolled out, including at the newly merged Adelaide University, where integration into the AUKUS military buildup is well underway.

This restructuring is compounding the damage done by the market-driven “education revolution” implemented by the Greens-backed Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013, which forced universities to rely increasingly on casual and fixed-term staff and on milking full-fee paying international students.

Today, an estimated 49 percent of staff are employed on an insecure casual basis, with 19 percent on limited term contracts, and only 32 percent on a permanent or tenurial basis. Both educators and students have suffered as a result. Class sizes have mushroomed, with “tutorials” often having up to 70 students. Since 1980, the teacher-student ratio has soared from about 1:12 to as high as 1:70 (depending on the calculation method).

The Labor government won the May 2025 federal election by default. The vote for the Coalition collapsed because it was widely identified as mirroring the Trump administration’s program of gutting social spending and public sector jobs. However, the worldwide shocks mean higher military spending and an even greater offensive against the living standards and social conditions of the working class than has already occurred under the Labor government since it took office in 2022.

The Liberal-National Coalition, the joint mainstay of capitalist rule with Labor since World War II, has been shattered. The ruling class is reliant on Labor and its associated trade union apparatuses to prosecute this agenda, which will provoke major social and class battles.

Opposition exists throughout the universities to the job destruction, course closures, pro-corporate restructuring and suppression of dissent. But the NTEU and CPSU leaders have for years blocked any unified fight by staff and students.

Instead, the union apparatuses have pressured educators into applying for “voluntary” redundancies, like the deal pushed through at Western Sydney University (WSU) last August, which displaced hundreds of staff members, particularly professional staff, forcing many to fight each other for new jobs or to leave.

The NTEU and CPSU have already this year struck another such deal at WSU, this time for a near four-year enterprise agreement that provides further real pay cuts—3.2 percent annually, compared to the resurgence of official inflation to 3.8 percent—and traps staff in the same kind of enterprise agreements that facilitated last year’s job carnage.

This is a warning that the unions will seek to impose similar sellouts everywhere in 2026.

This is not an aberration. It is part of the wider integration of all union leaderships into management and government mechanisms, particularly since the Prices and Incomes Accords that the Australian

Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) imposed on workers under the Hawke-Keating governments in the 1980s and 1990s.

Just quitting the unions in disgust, as many workers have done, is not an answer. Instead, staff and students must actively take matters into their own hands. For that, new democratic forms of organisation—*independent rank-and-file committees (RFCs)*—must be built and the existing ones at WSU and Macquarie University must be developed.

RFCS need to be formed everywhere to link up with workers in Australia and worldwide through the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. Our struggle on campus must be connected to working-class resistance internationally.

We urge staff and students to convene RFC meetings, elect committees under democratic rules, circulate statements and demands, and link with other RFCs. These committees can develop demands based on the needs of students and staff, not the dictates of management, governments and the corporate elite. We propose, in outline, initial demands that include:

- Pay increases surpassing the official inflation rate to compensate for past losses
- Halt and reverse the thousands of job cuts and the resulting skyrocketing workloads
- Stop the cuts to international student enrolments and defend the right of all students to higher education
- End the victimisation of academics who oppose Israel’s genocide in Gaza or the bipartisan support for US militarism. Defend genuine academic freedom and the basic democratic right to free speech
- Uphold the right to conduct research that is not dictated by the demands of corporate interests, governments and the military
- Secure employment for all university workers
- Free first-class education for all students instead of channelling billions of dollars into preparations for US-led wars

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 these issues and how to form RFCs, please contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators’ network:

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

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To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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