

Job cuts and restructuring continue at Australian universities, facilitated by the trade unions

A Western Sydney University Rank-and-File Committee member
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Hundreds of job cuts are continuing in 2026 at Australian public universities, on top of the almost 4,000 inflicted in 2025. This process is being propelled by the Albanese Labor government's pro-corporate and pro-military restructuring, set out in its Universities Accord, and enabled by trade union deals and enterprise agreements.

In the latest announcement this month, the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) will axe 121 academic jobs—about 10 percent of the UTS academic workforce—on top of around 200 professional staff positions, many by supposed “voluntary redundancies.”

UTS confirmed that it would no longer offer undergraduate public health degrees and would cut teacher education and international studies courses—thus slashing health, humanities and education options for students, as well as jobs.

That announcement came after the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) had diverted the anger and opposition of UTS staff and students, voiced at protest rallies last year, into a failed appeal to the Labor government's Fair Work Commission (FWC) for more time for consultation on the restructuring plan.

The Fair Work Commission (FWC), a pro-employer industrial tribunal, predictably ruled in favour of management's prerogatives. It said the university's obligation to consult staff under its enterprise agreement with the NTEU deal did not require “some form of merits review of UTS' decision-making, or weighing up the pros and cons of UTS' determination as to its financial position.”

That ruling further exposes claims by union officials that enterprise agreements (EAs) offer any protection against the ongoing political restructuring being implemented under the Albanese government. Instead, the EAs operate as straitjackets, prohibiting industrial action except during narrow union-controlled bargaining periods every three or four years.

During 2025, Australia's 39 public universities eliminated thousands of academic and professional staff jobs nationally. This was aided and abetted by the NTEU and the other main campus union apparatus, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), which have opposed any unified action by staff

and students across the country.

One of the sharpest experiences has been at Western Sydney University (WSU), where the NTEU and CPSU struck a deal with management last August to allow its restructuring to proceed, with the loss of nearly 200 jobs and the displacement of more than 700 professional staff. Then last month, while many members were still away on summer leave, the NTEU announced a vague “in-principle” agreement with management for a new 2026–2029 EA.

According to the NTEU, no details of this “in-principle” EA will be finalised for weeks. It must first be signed off by the NTEU national executive before NTEU members at WSU are permitted to examine, discuss and vote on it. In the meantime, the WSU management is already implementing the agreement, as a fait accompli, with the NTEU's assistance, including the imposition of new workloads.

At the same time, the NTEU is seeking to use the WSU deal as a national benchmark, touting it at the University of Newcastle for example, before members can even read or vote on it.

What is known about the “in-principle” EA is that it features another real pay cut, no greater protection against future restructuring and a closer partnership between the unions and management.

The NTEU has sent its members at WSU sketchy PowerPoint slides of the proposed EA.

The only specific information is that the near four-year EA would provide nominal pay rises of just 3.5 percent annually. That is well below the official Consumer Price Index (CPI), which resurged to 3.8 percent over the year to December and is predicted by the Reserve Bank of Australia to reach 4.2 percent by June.

That would continue the wage-cutting at WSU, as throughout the education workforce and the working class as a whole. The wage increases in the last EA imposed by the NTEU at WSU, covering 2022 to 2025, averaged less than 3 percent a year, while the CPI peaked at 7.8 percent in December 2022 and remained above 3 percent throughout the agreement's life.

On academic workloads, the NTEU's slides indicate that the

union has accepted management's demand for a universal 40/40/20 regime—that is 40 percent of hours for teaching, 40 for research and 20 for administration and governance—with managements able to “negotiate” to reduce an individual's research component down to 20 percent.

On professional staff workloads, the deal is even more vague, requiring only token bi-annual workload meetings in workgroups.

The wording on “Organisational Change”—a euphemism for further restructuring—is revealing. Far from job security, it provides for more “fill and spill” operations that force displaced staff members to compete against each other for reduced numbers of jobs.

According to the NTEU's own summary: “Unsuccessful applicants for new roles will receive detailed feedback on their applications. Where there are more applicants than positions in the new structure, there will be a mandated ‘comparative selection process’ assessing skills, experience and capacities.” That is, management will still pick and choose.

Another summary admits that WSU management failed to meet its pledge in the last EA to reduce its use of casual employment by 25 percent, but the NTEU proposes only to renew that target. In reality, the academics who have been “decasualised” since 2022 have been subjected to excessive workloads.

In return for the NTEU's services, the proposed EA will further entrench the union as a partner of management. All “union representatives” will have their time off for “trade union training” increased from 25 to 35 days a year.

And management has agreed to include the union in a “consultative committee” on the use of AI, which is expected to destroy hundreds more jobs. In other words, the NTEU will facilitate and assist management to suppress resistance.

The PowerPoints speak of “a range of safeguards to employment in the introduction of AI.” But the worthless character of those “safeguards” is indicated by the example given—a requirement to demonstrate what parts of PDs [position descriptions] are actually being replaced by AI during organisational change.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained and warned, the Labor government is starving the universities of adequate funding, along with schools, hospitals, the NDIS and other social programs, while allocating hundreds of billions of dollars for AUKUS submarines and other weaponry for a US-led war against China.

Labor's Universities Accord insists that universities must transform both their teaching and research in partnership with employers, and in line with the building of a war economy. It 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.

Following the December 14 terrorist attack at Bondi Beach,

the Albanese government also established a witch-hunting “antisemitism education taskforce,” chaired by businessman David Gonski and Jillian Segal—the Labor government's Zionist “antisemitism envoy.”

This body equates political opposition, particularly to Israel's US-backed genocide in Gaza, with antisemitism, providing a framework for censorship, curriculum changes, victimisations and repression in schools and universities. Its operations include imposing an “antisemitism report card” on universities, demanding the suppression of anti-genocide and other dissent, backed by the threat of funding cuts [link to report card article].

The policing role of the NTEU and CPSU is part of a decades-long corporatist integration of all unions 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 Labor governments in the 1980s and 1990s.

As the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators' rank-and-file network, explained in our opening year statement, 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 can discuss and advance demands based on the needs of students and staff, not the dictates of management, governments and the corporate elite—such as real pay increases to compensate for past losses, reverse the thousands of job cuts, end the victimisation of educators who oppose Israel's genocide in Gaza, defend free speech, and free first-class education for all students—as outlined in the statement.

To discuss these issues and how to form RFCs, please contact us:

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