

Union-initiated Australian parliamentary report covers up Labor's university restructuring agenda

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Yet another Labor Party-controlled parliamentary committee report into university governance was released in Australia last week.

An interim report by a New South Wales (NSW) parliamentary inquiry, just like a similar federal Senate report last December, is an effort to divert attention from the Albanese Labor government's corporate restructuring agenda.

It is this agenda, spelt out in Labor's 2024 Universities Accord, that is driving the axing of non-"priority" courses and research—particularly in arts and humanities—and the destruction, so far, of some 4,000 jobs nationally in the country's 39 public universities over the past 18 months.

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) hailed the NSW report, saying its "strong recommendations" were "prerequisites for the future change desperately needed in our sector." Just four months ago, the NTEU glorified the Senate report, describing it as a "watershed moment" marking "a new dawn for higher education."

These claims are totally baseless.

In reality, both reports demonstrate the utter bankruptcy of the NTEU's attempts to channel the anger and opposition of university staff and students into the arms of the very same Labor Party and political establishments responsible for the chronic underfunding and pro-business transformation of the universities over the past five decades.

The corporatisation of universities began with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of the 1980s and 1990s, which reintroduced student fees, and forced universities to find new corporate sources of funding. That was compounded by the marketised "education revolution" implemented by the Greens-backed Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013, which forced universities to rely even more on milking full-fee paying international students.

This process has been intensified by the Albanese government's Universities Accord, which is a blueprint for the further transformation of universities to satisfy the employment and research demands of the capitalist ruling class, combined with the development of an AUKUS-related war economy.

The months-long NSW inquiry, which was proposed by a

NTEU petition campaign, was chaired and led by Labor MPs, joined by Liberal, National and Green colleagues, presenting a unified parliamentary voice.

Just as the year-long Senate inquiry did, the NSW report accuses individual university managements of over-spending on corporate consultants and concocting financial deficits to justify cuts. This only serves to cover up the underlying causes of the assault on university educators, administrative staff and students.

The truth is that the hiring of consultants to reshape universities along corporate lines is inextricably bound up with Labor's agenda, outlined in the Universities Accord, which is not even mentioned in the report. The Accord ties funding to universities signing up to "mission-based compacts" with Labor's new Australian Tertiary Education Commission.

These "compacts" are based on "national priorities" set by the Labor government, featuring programs related to AUKUS and strategic industries such as critical minerals.

Nor does last week's report oppose this restructuring and the elimination of jobs. On the contrary, it buries the fact that managements at the two universities it deals with—University of Technology Sydney (UTS) and the University of Wollongong (UOW)—each succeeded in ultimately substantially pushing through their change plans, slightly modified, with the help of "voluntary" redundancies agreed to by the NTEU.

The UTS management announced in February that it will axe 121 academic jobs—about 10 percent of the university's academic workforce—on top of around 200 professional staff positions. That was down marginally from the original estimate of 166 academic job cuts. UTS will still no longer offer undergraduate public health degrees and will cut teacher education and international studies courses, thus slashing health, humanities and education options for students. UTS vice-chancellor and president Andrew Parfitt boasted that "we will achieve nearly 80 percent of our savings target" through "voluntary separations."

Likewise, last August, UOW management announced that its finalised "Change Plan" would result in the loss of the equivalent of 99.8 positions, rather than the originally proposed

155-185, but with the reduction in retrenchments made possible by cutting costs and “streamlining” operations.

In an email to the NTEU’s NSW members last week, the union’s state secretary Vince Caughley urged them to sign an open letter to state Labor government ministers asking them to adopt the parliamentary committee’s two main recommendations.

These proposals are for Labor’s state Treasurer Daniel Mookhey and the Audit Office of NSW, to conduct “performance audits” to “get to the bottom of the ‘financial crisis’ in our universities” and for Mookhey to update the NSW Treasury Reporting Directions to require greater transparency in annual reporting, to disclose all consultant expenditure.

Far from getting to the bottom of the real financial crisis, any such measures will only boost the powers of the state Labor government to assist its federal Labor counterpart to enforce the requirements of the Accord.

This means funnelling more students into courses to meet designated “skill shortages,” including those related to the AUKUS military pact, which involves spending hundreds of billions of dollars to acquire US and UK nuclear-powered attack submarines, long-range missiles and other hi-tech weaponry designed for use against China.

Since the Hawke and Keating measures, the level of federal government funding for domestic student enrolments has already halved from around 80 percent to 40 percent or less, while the teacher-student ratio has soared from about 1:12 to as high as 1:70.

None of this intensifying decades-long assault would be possible without the role of the NTEU and the other main campus trade union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU). Opposition exists throughout the universities to the job destruction, course closures, and pro-corporate restructuring, as well as the suppression of anti-genocide and anti-war 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.

In January, the NTEU and CPSU struck another such pact at WSU, this time for a near four-year enterprise agreement that provides further real pay cuts—3.5 percent annually, compared to the spiralling of inflation—and traps staff in the same kinds of enterprise agreements that facilitated last year’s job carnage. That “in-principle” agreement has still not been seen, let alone voted upon, by union members.

Critical political issues are posed. The Albanese government won the 2025 federal election after the Liberal-National Coalition’s vote disintegrated, largely because it was widely

identified as mirroring the Trump administration’s program of gutting social spending and public sector jobs, including in education.

However, the Labor government has once again shown its true colours by rushing to back the criminal and disastrous US-Israeli war against Iran, and it is presiding over an even greater offensive against the living standards and social conditions of the working class, while pouring hundreds of billions into AUKUS and other war preparations.

With the Coalition shattered, the ruling class is relying on Labor and its associated trade union apparatuses to prosecute this agenda, deepening a collaboration cemented since the corporatist Prices and Incomes Accords that the unions imposed on workers under the Hawke and Keating governments.

Despite claiming to oppose the corporatisation of universities, the NTEU and CPSU apparatuses have diverted university workers into parliamentary dead-ends, while pushing for further enterprise agreements with individual managements that facilitate such restructuring.

To fight this reactionary agenda, university workers and students have to create new forms of organisation—democratically established rank-and-file committees, totally independent of Labor, the Greens and the trade unions, that will organise a unified struggle. These committees can develop demands based on their needs, not the dictates of the corporate elite and the war machine.

These committees can link up with other workers in struggle in Australia and worldwide through the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. This is part of a broader necessary struggle against the capitalist profit system itself, its ever-greater oligarchic wealth and its plunge into barbaric and catastrophic wars in the Middle East and beyond.

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

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)



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