

Australia's Deakin University shelves job cuts to seek union consultation

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Faced by widespread staff and student outrage, Deakin University management yesterday abruptly withdrew its plans for a sweeping restructure that threatened hundreds of jobs. This backdown, however, is a tactical retreat by the university executive.

The financial and political framework driving the attack on jobs and conditions remains in place. Management has said that new cuts will be prepared after consultation processes in which the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has signalled its readiness to play a central role.

In an email to staff, caretaker Vice-Chancellor Matthew Clarke and Chancellor Claire Higgins announced that Deakin will not proceed with its proposed Major Workplace Change (MWC) which it had announced on June 4.

The MWC proposal covered more than 1,830 professional staff roles in the Academic Portfolio and in Infrastructure and Digital at both the Melbourne and Geelong campuses. It was a “spill and fill” operation: existing positions abolished, with at least 620 staff forced to reapply for their own jobs and 138 jobs axed.

The cuts would have included the dissolution of the Disability Resource Centre, which supports 6,000 students, and the offloading of disability support services onto a merged “student experience” division—with only complex cases retained in-house.

Management also flagged outsourcing most student mental health and counselling services to an external provider. In addition, the library’s responsibilities would be forcibly “realigned” around artificial intelligence, with staff told their names would not reappear in the new structure.

Management’s email shows that nothing fundamental has changed. It insisted that “the financial realities facing the sector and the University” remain and declared: “Change will still be needed in time. But it must be the right change, shaped with you, and that is the lesson we

are taking from this.”

On its Deakin branch Facebook page, the NTEU declared yesterday’s announcement “a big win and huge relief for staff.” Far from demanding an end to the job cuts, however, it instead called for “these processes [to] become more open, more genuinely consultative and less fraught in the future.”

This is a warning that the union apparatus will seek to channel anger back into backroom talks, to secure a place at the table in crafting revised cuts.

Management’s invocation of “financial realities” is the language of corporate executives preparing the next offensive on jobs, workloads and conditions. And these “realities” are above all the result of the Albanese Labor government’s pro-corporate and militarist agenda, which has already driven the elimination of about 4,000 jobs across Australia’s public universities over the past two years.

Labor has demanded the restructuring of both teaching and research for employer and military purposes under its 2024 Universities Accord blueprint, which proposed tying funding to mission statements based on declared national priorities, which include the AUKUS military pact and war-related critical minerals.

To add to the financial pressure on universities, Labor’s May 12 budget continued to cut funding in real terms. The Albanese government has also retained the previous Liberal-National Coalition government’s Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) regime, which imposes punitive fees and debts on humanities students, while cutting the funding for teaching them.

In addition, Labor has slashed the numbers of international student visas and enrolments, on which the universities have relied to survive.

About 600 Deakin staff had attended an online NTEU meeting last week where workers denounced the secrecy of the process and the fact that many could not even tell

from the documentation whether their jobs still existed.

The response by NTEU representatives was revealing. The union's central complaint was that it had not been consulted early enough and denied the opportunity to prepare the change proposal alongside management. With an enterprise bargaining period approaching, officials said they would attempt to negotiate for such a role. There was no proposal for strike action.

More than 2,000 people signed an open letter denouncing the MWC, jointly issued by the NTEU, Deakin University Student Association, Geelong Disability Collective and Deakin Disability Neurodivergency Association.

Yet the content of the letter pointed to the partnership that the NTEU is seeking with management. It criticised the restructure as chaotic, poorly explained and lacking any supporting evidence. It did not challenge the Labor government's broader austerity agenda.

Instead, the letter proposed either a suspension of the MWC process or an extension of the timeline for consultation and "the establishment of structured dialogue mechanisms, including a working group comprising staff, students and management."

The letter concluded: "We are not opposed to change. We are opposed to change done badly, without evidence, without honesty, and without care for our people who are most affected."

This signalled the NTEU's readiness to work with management in "dialogue mechanisms" to facilitate cuts and stifle resistance to them, as the NTEU has done at all the other universities where job cuts and restructuring have been imposed.

The NTEU's response is in line with its record at Deakin and nationally.

During the first years of the COVID pandemic, the union struck a "Job Protection Framework" with universities that facilitated the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs, offering wage cuts of up to 15 percent.

At Deakin, this translated into "unavoidable" redundancies that eliminated about 300 jobs, and a further 200 axed under the "Deakin Reimagined" restructure in 2021.

Nationally, the NTEU has not opposed the Albanese government's underlying corporate and militarist program. It has helped administer it, ensuring restructuring is imposed with minimal disruption, while workers are isolated university by university.

The opposition among Deakin staff and students, and more broadly among university workers to the relentless

cuts and transformation of campuses into corporate-military hubs, is part of a global wave of struggles against austerity and war.

But unless this opposition is consciously organised and given a clear political direction, management, working hand-in-glove with the NTEU, will only return with a new "consulted" package of cuts and restructures.

A different strategy is required.

Workers cannot entrust their jobs, conditions and the future of public education to the NTEU bureaucracy which has shown time and again that its primary concern is a partnership with management and the government. Nor can the fight be limited to Deakin alone: the Labor government's assault on higher education is nationwide.

Deakin staff and students need to form independent rank-and-file committees, democratically run, outside of and opposed to the union apparatus. Such committees must demand full transparency about the university's finances, reject all job cuts and outsourcing and insist that disability, counselling, library and all student support services be fully funded and expanded.

These committees at Deakin should turn to workers across the university sector and beyond, including the Victorian public school teachers who are confronting a sellout deal between the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the state Labor government, to develop a unified struggle.

The starting point must be the assertion that education is a social right, not a business, and that the resources exist in society—currently being poured into military spending or monopolised by the corporate giants and the super-rich—to guarantee secure, well-paid jobs and high-quality, fully funded education for all.

To discuss how to take up this fight, contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators' network in Australia:

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

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



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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