

Australia: What the proposed enterprise agreements at Western Sydney University reveal

A WSU Rank-and-File Committee member
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A closer examination of the enterprise agreements that the trade unions are trying to impose quickly at Western Sydney University (WSU)—as a model for wider use at Australia’s 38 other public universities—is uncovering the full extent of the attack on pay, jobs and conditions.

The details, such as expanded workloads, show why the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) rushed last week, in a truly anti-democratic fashion, to push through a small meeting an endorsement of its deal with the WSU management before its members had a chance to read the documents, let alone discuss and debate them.

What is happening at WSU is a warning to staff and students alike of the retrograde conditions that the NTEU and the other main campus union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), are trying to inflict on them nationally, by separate enterprise agreements at one university after the other.

It shows the need for a unified struggle by university staff and students against the new wave of three- or four-year enterprise agreements, which will facilitate further pro-corporate and pro-military reshaping of the universities, on top of the 4,000 job cuts and restructuring under the Albanese Labor government over the past two years.

As the WWSW reported, in an NTEU online members meeting at WSU last Thursday, NTEU representatives bulldozed through a 45 to 18 vote, with 7 abstentions, to endorse its proposed 2026–2030 agreements for academic and professional staff—despite many objections in the Zoom chat to the short notice for the meeting, as well as what little was known about the content of the sellout deal.

The NTEU WSU branch president David Burchell boasted that the WSU branch was “leading the charge” nationally. The NTEU had released copies of the agreements only three days earlier, after five months of closed-door discussions with management and “approval” by the NTEU national leadership. That gave staff members totally inadequate time to read and properly review the agreements—which have more than 120 pages each.

Access to the documents remains difficult, even for union members. As yet, non-union members and students have no access at all, even though the management may move swiftly to put the agreements to an all-staff ballot under the Fair Work industrial relations legislation.

In an email to NTEU members at WSU, Burchell stated: “We believe the Agreements potentially provide important improvements to members’ rights and conditions, especially in conversion, organisational change, casual rights, academic workloads and pay.” All of this is totally false. This article focusses on the academic agreement but the professional one is similar, if not worse, as our next article will review, imposing even greater burdens on the over-worked professional staff. Here are the key details:

More real pay cuts

The proposed agreements would inflict another four years of sub-inflationary pay rises—this time averaging just 3.5 percent annually. This is way below the soaring cost of living, fuelled by the ongoing impact of the criminal US-Israeli war on Iran, which the Albanese government backed within hours of the attack being launched on February 28.

The agreements promise a 16.92 percent pay rise spread across nearly four years (March 2026 to January 2030), averaging 3.5 percent a year, when the Consumer Price Index (CPI) remains above 4 percent.

Over the past decade (2016–2026), WSU staff already have lost an estimated 6 percent to 8 percent in real pay relative to the CPI. When factoring in structural household costs, the loss in purchasing power is closer to 10 percent to 12 percent.

These real pay cuts deepened in the last 2022–2025 agreements. They yielded salary increases totalling 11.45 percent over three years, averaging close to 3 percent annually. But compounding the CPI from late 2022 to early 2026 points to a cumulative cost-of-living increase of roughly 15 percent to 17 percent, so a real pay cut of about 5 percent in three years.

Increased workloads and less preparation time

Both the professional and academic agreements provide for workload increases. Under the proposed academic agreement, academics can be loaded up by their departmental supervisors with extra teaching, beyond the nominal split in workloads of 40 percent teaching, 40 percent research and 20 percent university governance or community engagement.

Clause 23.18, for example, states that an employee’s academic profile can allocate up to 60 percent for teaching. Clause 23.15 states: “Employees may be requested, but will not be pressured, to work beyond the requirements of their agreed IWAs.”

IWAs are individual work agreements, negotiated with supervisors. Regardless of the worthless caveat about not being pressured, academics will be under relentless pressure to work beyond their formal IWA, both to overcome staffing shortages and protect their jobs and career prospects.

Moreover, class preparation time has been cut compared to the 2022 agreement. The only stipulation is that preparation time must be allocated for “non-repeat” lectures and tutorials at a duration at least equal to the corresponding teaching activity. But preparation for such classes takes at least three or four times that amount in research and the development of teaching materials.

There are no other specific allocations, such as for repeat classes and subject coordination. Instead, there are more empty words such as the need for departmental managements to “ensure equitable and realistic workloads across an academic unit.”

Many academic staff have reported a 6–7 percent increase in teaching load compared to 2025. For some, the document effectively means seven extra hours of work a week.

And management representatives retain a majority on unit workplan committees to resolve workload disputes, outnumbering elected staff representatives.

Worse treatment of casuals

For the thousands of sessional academics that WSU exploits to teach classes, there are no guaranteed casual conversions, unlike the 2022 agreement that purported to ensure 150 conversions over three years.

There is just a promised overall 25 percent reduction in the overall casual academic workforce, which was also promised but not met in 2022–25. Any former casuals will still be loaded up with heavy teaching loads of up to 70 percent of their working hours—only allocated 10 percent research workloads, rising to 30 percent in their third year.

No protection from more job losses and restructuring

Last August, the NTEU and CPSU struck a deal with the WSU management to allow its “Reset” restructuring to proceed, with the loss of some 187 jobs and the displacement of more than 600 professional staff.

Far from protection against further restructuring, the proposed agreements provide for a closer partnership and collaboration between the unions and the management in “Managing Change.”

The wording in both agreements allows for more “fill and spill” operations that force displaced staff members to compete against each other for reduced numbers of jobs. For example: “If after calling for expressions of interest in voluntary redundancy, there remain more directly affected Ongoing Employees than there are substantially the same positions in the new structure, then placement into those positions will be determined using a Comparative Assessment Process.”

This “assessment process” leaves management able to pick and choose through “a merit-based comparative assessment,” supposedly on the basis of experience, skill, education, qualifications and training.

The “job security” clauses are meaningless. The management will “seek to” “minimise retrenchments where possible” and “not increase casual employment at the expense of ongoing employment.”

Employees can be subjected to more than one organisational change process that may result in the termination of their employment during the next four years if “any exceptional circumstances” arise, such as “substantial adverse changes in Government funding or major negative economic disruption.”

Even this “limitation” will “not apply to any form of voluntary separation, including calls for expressions of interest in voluntary redundancy.” Supposed voluntary redundancies, often under pressure, and encouraged by the unions, are in fact the preferred means for the management to eliminate jobs in a manner that stifles resistance.

Accelerated misconduct, illness and injury processes

The processes for misconduct charges and injury or ill-health assessments have been accelerated to give staff members less time to prepare and challenge victimisations.

“Misconduct” that can lead to disciplinary action is defined in sweeping terms. It can be “a breach of the University’s (unspecified) policy.” “Serious misconduct” that can lead to sacking can be conduct that causes “serious and imminent risk” to “the reputation, viability, or profitability of the University.”

Despite a nominal clause protecting intellectual freedom to “express unpopular or controversial views,” these provisions could be used against dissenting staff members, including those falsely accused of antisemitism for opposing the Gaza genocide.

Last week, Education Minister Jason Clare warned that universities risk losing accreditation for government funding if they fail to commit to addressing antisemitism, under new legislation that comes into force on July 15, setting so-called threshold standards for accreditation.

Illness or injury also can be used to sack a staff member. Under clause 48.2, the management can order an employee to undergo a medical examination by a doctor nominated by the management if the employee’s ability to perform their duties “within a reasonable period of time” is “in doubt.”

Our campaign

The WSU Rank-and-File Committee is preparing a campaign for a “no” vote by all WSU workers, whether academic or professional staff, or union or non-union members, if and when the management puts the agreements to an all-staff ballot as required under the workplace laws.

This attack on university workers is occurring in a definite context. As we have documented, under its Universities Accord, the Albanese government is starving the universities of adequate funding, along with public schools, public hospitals, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and other social programs, while allocating hundreds of billions of dollars for AUKUS and other military expansions.

It is time to take a stand. For decades, the NTEU and CPSU have imposed one enterprise agreement after another in the universities, cutting wages in real terms, driving up workloads and assisting restructuring. This has not only affected university educators and all staff members, but also the students—left with larger classes, higher fees, narrower study options, less educational support, fewer services and greater restrictions on free speech.

University workers and students have to build new genuine democratic forms of organisation—rank-and-file committees, totally independent of the trade unions—that will develop and fight for demands based on their needs, and those of working people and society as a whole, not the dictates of capitalist governments, the corporate ruling class and the plunge into war.

This is part of a broader international struggle for democratic working-class control to reorganise society along socialist lines in the interests of humanity, not the billionaire oligarchs and the war machines.

To discuss these issues or to join our campaign and help build rank-and-file committees, contact us via the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators’ rank-and-file network initiated by the Socialist Equality Party:

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact