

# Australia: What professional staff face at Western Sydney University

A WSU Rank-and-File Committee member  
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Professional staff at Western Sydney University (WSU) are already bearing the main brunt of “Reset” restructuring, which cut nearly 200 jobs and displaced about 600 professional staff last year. These workers are now threatened with more such treatment under the proposed four-year enterprise agreements being pushed by the campus trade unions.

After striking a deal last August to assist the restructuring, both the unions that cover the professional workers at WSU—the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU)—are trying to help management impose new 2026–30 agreements.

This is part of a new wave of such sellout deals at each of Australia’s universities, with the NTEU saying that the WSU agreements are leading the way. That poses the necessity for a unified fight against these compacts and the underlying pro-corporate and militarist agenda of the Albanese Labor government, which has driven the elimination of some 4,000 jobs across the country over the past two years.

In a small online NTEU members meeting at WSU last Thursday, NTEU representatives bulldozed through a 45 to 18 vote, with 7 abstentions, to endorse its proposed agreements for both academic and professional staff. That was despite many objections in the Zoom chat to the fact that members were given just three days to read the two documents, each more than 120 pages.

A reading of the proposed professional staff agreement shows that it is even worse than the academic staff version—which the WSWS reviewed yesterday—laying the groundwork for further destruction of jobs and conditions.

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

Information about the content of the agreements is doubly vital because such a ballot may be called quickly even though, as yet, non-union staff members and students still have no access to the documents.

Some clauses are common to both the academic and professional staff agreements. As outlined in yesterday’s article, they include:

## Deeper 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.

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

## More restructuring and job losses

Both agreements would facilitate further restructuring. They allow for more “fill and spill” operations that force displaced staff members to compete against each other for reduced numbers of jobs via a “Comparative Assessment Process.”

This “assessment process” leaves management able to pick and choose. Employees could be subjected to more than one “organisational change” 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, encouraged by the unions, are the preferred means to eliminate jobs in a manner that stifles resistance.

But the professional staff agreement would hand even greater power to management. Some of the key provisions are:

## Redeployment or retrenchment

Under the heading of Restructuring, management could place employees in “suitable” other positions, applying the Comparative Assessment Process, even if that means a lower-paid job or

transfer to another of WSU's far-flung campuses.

The criteria for suitability—"necessary essential skills, qualifications and/or experience, or is likely to attain them following a reasonable period of retraining"—would leave arbitrary power in the hands of management. If staff were placed on lower grades, their salary would remain at the higher level only for one or two years, depending on the classification.

Clause 55.19 states that if management is unable to redeploy a displaced employee within a specified redeployment period, their position will be made redundant and they will be subject to retrenchment.

Likewise, clauses 54.23 and 54.24 provide that if organisational change results in an employee being relocated to a different campus and this would result in an "unreasonable increase in their travel time or costs, or unreasonably impact on their family or carer's responsibilities," management would, "if practicable," consider relocation options.

If the option proved unworkable or the relocation remains unreasonable for the employee, the employee will then become displaced and redeployment and redundancy will apply.

### **Increased workloads**

Under clause 28, management can increase workloads due to organisational change, the introduction of new workflows and processes, or changes to technical systems and infrastructure.

The only requirements would be to "outline any steps to mitigate the effect of increased workloads," or for the relevant project team or manager to "consider the impact on workloads."

If an employee wanted to challenge their workload, they could request a workload review through discussion with their supervisor or ultimately escalate the dispute to the Chief People Officer—the head of employment relations—to determine the outcome.

### **Artificial intelligence**

By clause 69.1, the unions "acknowledge that the University may utilise artificial intelligence (AI) systems in the course of its operations." This could see hundreds more jobs eliminated via "organisational change," to be enforced by the same comparative assessment, redeployment and retrenchment processes.

### **Reclassification applications**

If a staff member wished to challenge their pay grade classification, they could be denied by their work unit and the Office for People and Culture, with only an appeal possible to a

management-majority Classification Review Panel.

### **Unsatisfactory performance**

As per clause 57.3, unsatisfactory performance would be defined simply as "over a reasonable period of time, failed to meet the standard of performance expected for their position." On such charges, staff members could be sacked by the vice chancellor or a management-majority Unsatisfactory Performance Review Committee.

These powers are in addition to the provisions for misconduct or serious misconduct, defined in similar sweeping terms, with review by a management-majority Misconduct Committee. As in the proposed academic staff agreement, "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."

### **Rank-and-file committees needed**

As we said in yesterday's article, under its Universities Accord, the Albanese government is starving the universities of adequate funding, along with public schools, hospitals, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and other social programs, while allocating hundreds of billions of dollars for AUKUS and other military expansions.

For decades, the NTEU and CPSU have imposed enterprise agreements in the universities, cutting wages in real terms, driving up workloads and assisting restructuring. This has not only affected all staff members, but also students—left with less staff, narrower study options and fewer services.

University workers and students must build 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.

To discuss these issues 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:

Email: [cfpe.aus@gmail.com](mailto:cfpe.aus@gmail.com)

Facebook: [facebook.com/commforpubliceducation](https://www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation)

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To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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