

# Australia: Low turnout in vote on union sellout deal at Western Sydney University

A WSU Rank-and-File Committee member  
9 August 2026

Recently obtained voting turnout figures for the ballot conducted late last month at Western Sydney University (WSU) on new union-management agreements further reveal the lack of staff support for the sellout deals, which impose real pay cuts, increase workloads and clear the way for further job cuts and pro-corporate restructuring.

The participation rates in the enterprise agreement (EA) votes were tiny—approximately 12.2 percent and 16.7 percent respectively of academics and professional staff.

According to WSU management’s misleading official announcement, of the staff members who participated in the online ballots, 82.83 percent of academic staff voted Yes for the Academic Staff Agreement and 91.79 percent of professional staff voted for the Professional Staff Agreement.

Thus, even among the staff who actually voted, nearly 20 percent of the academics and almost 10 percent of their professional colleagues rejected the EAs endorsed by the two main campus trade unions, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU).

That No vote, for which the WSU Rank-and-File Committee actively campaigned, was almost four times higher in percentage terms than in the previous EA vote at the university in 2022, which paved the way for last year’s brutal “Reset” restructuring that axed nearly 200 jobs and displaced more than 600 professional staff members, to which the two unions agreed last August.

But the poor turnout figures provide a more accurate picture. Taken together with the official results, they show that only 10 percent of academic staff and 15 percent of professional staff actually voted Yes. In other words, 90 percent or 85 percent either voted No or failed to vote. That is a measure of discontent with the entire process, although the disaffection remains mainly dormant at this stage, brewing beneath the surface.

The participation at WSU was even lower than for a similar union-backed ballot at the University of Newcastle last month, where the turnout for the vote to accept the agreement was just 31 percent of academic staff and 43 percent of professional staff. At both universities, it is clear that the support for the agreements fell far short of a 50 percent majority.

The low participation rates illustrate how the enterprise bargaining regime under the Labor government’s Fair Work Act allows employers and trade union apparatuses to jointly impose legally binding EAs on workers without majority support, fuelling growing rank-and-file disaffection.

Under the Fair Work Act, a union-management EA only has to be approved by half the workers who vote, not half the workforce who are then bound by it legally, and prohibited from taking industrial action for the next three or four years.

By contrast, the same legislation requires that any vote for industrial action, which can only occur in a union-controlled bargaining period, needs a “double majority”: at least 50 percent of all eligible employees must cast a vote, and more than 50 percent of the valid votes cast must approve the proposed industrial action.

The NTEU leaders are trying to cover up the reality of the low level of support for their EA deals.

NTEU general secretary Damien Cahill sent another deceptive email to all NTEU members nationally on August 6 claiming that staff at WSU, as well as Newcastle and Adelaide universities, had “overwhelmingly voted to approve new enterprise agreements that lift the standards for our sector.”

Cahill added: “When university staff stand together, they win.” It was the second almost identical email in a week!

That is a measure of the NTEU bureaucracy’s anxiety to push through similar sellouts at individual universities across the country. They are desperate to prevent rebellions like that by the public school educators in Victoria, who have twice rejected deals between the Australian Education Union and the state Labor government that would have done nothing to fix their intolerable workloads and staffing shortages.

Far from lifting “standards,” the EAs at WSU inflict further wage cuts—nominal rises averaging 3.5 percent a year, well below the rising cost-of-living, which is being fuelled by the impact of the criminal US-Israeli war on Iran.

As exposed in detail by the WSU Rank-and-File Committee, both the academic and professional staff EAs increase workloads, including reduced class preparation times and clauses allowing professional staff to have higher workloads imposed on them.

Moreover, the agreements provide no protection against more

restructuring, which has eliminated up to 4,000 jobs in public universities nationally over the past 18 months. The EAs also drop previous promises of permitting some of the thousands of casuals at WSU to seek permanency.

In addition, the EAs contain accelerated unsatisfactory performance, misconduct, illness and injury processes that management can use to victimise dissident staff members. Further, they reinforce an array of joint union-management committees—effectively a partnership with the unions to stifle resistance and discontent.

The WSU Rank-and-File Committee organised an active campaign for a No vote by all WSU workers, whether academic or professional staff, or union or non-union members. We advanced demands based on the real needs and interests of staff and students, such as pay increases of 35 percent to cover inflation and recoup past losses, halt all increased workloads and cuts to class preparation times, permanency for all casuals who want it, free first-class education for all students and billions for education, not war.

Composed of both staff and students, the rank-and-file committee will now lead the fight against the enforcement of the EAs by the management and the unions, including workload demands, job losses and course cuts. These EAs also affect the students—left with larger classes, narrower study options, less educational support and fewer services.

We will provide the organisation and voice to develop informed opposition to the underlying agenda: the Albanese Labor government’s reshaping of tertiary education along pro-corporate and militaristic lines, its crackdown on anti-genocide and other dissent, and its threats to deregister universities that do not comply.

Under its Universities Accord, the Labor government is restructuring universities in line with its proclaimed national priorities, which feature the AUKUS military pact against China and other war-related industries, such as the mining and processing of strategic critical minerals.

Each university’s funding is now being tied to “mission-based compacts” with the government’s new Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC), assessed on how well the university serves the “national priorities.”

At the same time, the Labor government has slashed the number of international students—echoing One Nation in making them scapegoats for the cost-of-living crisis devastating working-class households—thus depriving universities of fee revenue on which they have relied to offset chronic underfunding.

Labor has still refused to honour its 2022 election promise to abandon the previous Liberal-National Coalition government’s reactionary Job-ready Graduates program. This scheme imposes exorbitant fees of more than \$50,000 for a three-year humanities, arts or business degree, and reduces the funding for universities to deliver those courses, costing them more than \$1 billion a year.

As displayed in its May budget, Labor is deliberately further 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 weaponry.

Last week, the government unveiled a bipartisan parliamentary committee inquiry into preparedness for war, which involves subordinating every aspect of society, including the economy and the education system, to the military buildup and suppressing inevitable opposition.

All the trade unions, including the NTEU and CPSU, are trying to ram through new EAs, which will facilitate Labor’s agenda and cement their collaboration with the government and managements in enforcing it.

Rank-and-file committees (RFCs) must be built in the universities and other workplaces to reach out, throughout the working class, for a collective struggle against this program of war and austerity, and link up with workers worldwide through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

RFCs are developing and fighting for demands based on the needs of working people and society as a whole, not the dictates of capitalist governments and the corporate ruling class.

As we said in our statement calling for a No Vote, such demands can be won only as part of an 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 how to join the WSU RFC or form an RFC at your university or workplace, please contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators’ rank-and-file network:

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

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

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