

Corporate restructuring and job destruction deepen at Australian universities

Mike Head

28 October 2021

Unprecedented attacks on university workers and students—massive job losses, course cuts and pro-business restructuring—are intensifying throughout Australia’s public universities, while the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) suppresses opposition.

Federal and state governments and university managements are exploiting the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic to accelerate the transformation of universities into vocational institutions servicing the requirements of employers, with any research dedicated to satisfying the needs of big business or war preparations.

So far, this pandemic restructuring has destroyed more than 40,000 jobs, and possibly as many as 90,000, including casuals—all without any strike action called by the NTEU.

Some of the most sweeping moves in recent weeks have been spearheaded at universities based in Melbourne and regional areas of the state of Victoria. On October 12, Deakin University, which has campuses across Melbourne, Geelong and Warrnambool, announced it would go ahead with “a major organisational change,” branded “Deakin Reimagined.”

This will result in the loss of over 200 more jobs, on top of the 350 eliminated in an earlier “change process” during the first year of the pandemic, out of a workforce of about 5,000.

The management’s “realignment” seeks to make Deakin a “post-pandemic university.” It features the stripping out of academic leadership positions from many disciplines—leaving only the lowest level staff, increased teaching workloads and the use of “Teaching Scholar” positions to replace Teaching and Research academics with educators doing mass teaching.

Deakin’s management brushed aside pleas from the NTEU, made in a series of letters to the vice-chancellor in September, for greater consultation with the trade union on “alternative ways to achieve the University’s

objectives without forced redundancies and significant disruption.”

Far from initiating any industrial campaign against this onslaught, let alone calling for a unified national mobilisation across the sector, the NTEU—as always—pleaded for the management to quell unrest by “a combination of natural attrition and a voluntary early retirement scheme to achieve savings without compulsory redundancies.”

Likewise, at Federation University, which has campuses at Ballarat and other regional Victorian centres, management is proceeding to axe one third of ongoing staff members in Humanities and Social Sciences. That is despite 82 percent of staff members in Arts last year signing a petition against unreasonable academic workloads that were affecting the quality of their work, as well as their health, safety and work-life balance.

On July 14, La Trobe University, which also has campuses in Melbourne and across regional Victoria, announced the slashing of 230 jobs as part of a “Change Proposal,” on top of 400 last year, taking the toll to 15 percent of the university’s permanent workforce.

As at a number of other universities, management instituted a “Hunger Games”-style spill and fill operation, with staff forced to vie for remaining positions.

La Trobe University’s NTEU branch last year adopted a version of the union’s fraudulently named “Jobs Protection Framework” (JPF). The JPF was proposed in May 2020 to allow university managements nationally to cut wages by up to 15 percent, while still eliminating “at least 12,000 jobs.”

Even more far-reaching moves are underway in Sydney. More than 60 academic posts are being eliminated at the University of Technology Sydney, which already shed over 350 jobs in 2020 through a “voluntary separation program,” with countless casual and fixed-term staff also losing work.

At the nearby University of Sydney (USyd), one of the country's supposed elite institutions, there was shock at an NTEU branch meeting on October 14 when union branch officials said that in enterprise bargaining talks the management had proposed a "scorched earth" policy that was "absolutely beyond anything we were thinking."

This included scrapping the traditional 40-40-20 (teaching/research/administration) workload model for all academics. They said management's emphasis would be on teaching that brings in the dollars, while research would be only something that certain "stars" would do.

But the union representatives opposed a call from the floor for immediate strike action. They were aided by members of two pseudo-left groups, Socialist Alternative and Solidarity, who suggested "preparing" an industrial action ballot process, which takes at least six weeks.

The union branch president said the NTEU would begin "consultations" with members in different faculties before considering applying for an industrial action ballot.

A supporter of the Committee for Public Education, which is led by the Socialist Equality Party, objected in the meeting's zoom chat. "I don't agree with this proposal. We are clearly up against a major international assault on education of which USyd is only a part," he said. "The EY report makes that absolutely clear, it calls for the "death" of tertiary education in Australia and New Zealand. What we need is a broad movement across the entire university sector, not isolated industrial actions at individual universities."

The EY report, published in August by a giant global corporate consulting firm, formerly known as Ernst & Young, demanded that the pandemic be used to put an end to universities as they currently exist, to be replaced by corporate vocational and research services.

The NTEU is urging university workers to back the return of another Labor Party-led government on the false hope that it would soften the offensive being conducted by the current Liberal-National government on behalf of the financial elite.

However, soon after the release of the EY report, Labor's shadow education minister Tanya Plibersek gave a speech that dovetailed with it. Addressing an *Australian Financial Review* gathering, she presented a Labor government as the best means of escalating the corporate restructuring of tertiary education.

Plibersek proposed a bipartisan "accord" between university managements, staff, unions, business, students and parents to produce "a university system designed to underpin job creation, productivity and our national

prosperity."

Plibersek boasted that previous Labor governments had led the way in transforming tertiary education from a basic social right, free to all, into a money-making enterprise.

The 2007–13 Greens-backed Rudd and Gillard Labor governments, in which Plibersek was a cabinet minister, imposed an "education revolution," featuring a "demand-driven" system. It slashed university funding by several billion dollars in 2012–13, and compelled universities to compete with each other for enrolments, particularly in business-oriented courses, in order to survive financially.

If the "death" of universities is to be averted, and public education defended, students and staff need to join in a common struggle, independent of the NTEU and other thoroughly corporatised trade unions. This requires the building of a network of joint rank-and-file committees to take the fight forward, guided by a program that rejects the dictates of the financial markets and fights for the basic social right of all to a decent, free education at all levels.

These committees would link up, through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, with workers worldwide, who are facing similar critical struggles against the impact of the worsening global crisis, and discuss the necessity for an opposed socialist perspective: one that fights for the complete reorganisation of society in the interests of all, not the soaring wealth accumulation of the billionaires.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact