

Rank-and-file meeting issues call: Stop the Western Sydney University College cuts!

A WSU Rank-and-File Committee member
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The Western Sydney University Rank-and-File Committee is campaigning to stop the destruction of jobs and the pro-business restructuring at WSU College. To join the committee, contact us at: rfc.wsu@gmail.com

It is not too late to halt the destructive restructuring and job cuts at the Western Sydney University College, the university's wholly-owned preparatory college.

That is the message from the discussion at a public meeting on July 31 convened by the recently formed Western Sydney University Rank-and-File Committee (WSU-RFC).

That was despite the WSU management already marketing the cut-down college to students and their families. The management is not telling them about the elimination of more than 10 percent of the learning and teaching positions at The College and its divisive "spill and fill" regime, which forces staff members to compete against each other for the remaining posts.

Participants said everything depends on intensifying and broadening the rank-and-file committee's campaign against the cuts. They called on WSU and WSU College staff, students and members of the wider working-class community to join the committee.

The meeting made clear that WSU College is a test case for corporate restructuring and the elimination of thousands of jobs across the tertiary education sector as a result of the Albanese Labor government's continued under-funding of universities, now intensified by its reactionary cuts to international student enrolments.

Opening and chairing the meeting, Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee member Chris Gordon said it had been organised to discuss what was happening at The College and to place it in a broader educational and political context.

WSU-RFC co-convenor and WSU College educator Gabriela Zabala, whose job is directly threatened by the gutting of the college, as are those of all her colleagues, gave the first report to the meeting.

"Members and supporters of this committee have already

carried out important campaigns over the past several weeks at four WSU campuses to bring the WSU College cuts to the attention of staff and students," Zabala explained.

"Apart from our work, however, no one at WSU, staff and students alike, even knows about the attack on the College, which plays a vital role in preparing students for study at WSU.

"That is because the main union in the tertiary sector, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has isolated us. It has done nothing to alert WSU staff and students. No posters, no leaflets, nothing...

"That makes it clear: if the job cuts and restructuring are to be defeated, and they must be, the rank-and-file committee has to be developed to lead the fight."

Zabala reported that the NTEU had repeatedly tried to block the campaign. "At the last NTEU Zoom meeting I was able to attend, I was removed by the NTEU officials and was only readmitted after about 40 minutes once my colleagues called for a procedural motion to let me back in.

"Such hostility does not emerge from a position of strength, but rather from a fear of being exposed. Workers in other industries face similar issues with their trade unions. In countries such as the US, UK, Germany and Sri Lanka, as well as in Australia, we have established rank-and-file committees in industries, including in education, health, auto, rail and postal, Amazon, logistics and buses, to name a few."

Zabala said the NTEU was trying to isolate individuals and encourage them to take redundancies. The union was also refusing to defend non-NTEU members, "of which there are many at The College."

The restructuring would not only affect staff, but also students, whose quality of education was likely to be diminished by what was termed block mode courses, she said.

"Block mode is an immersive style of learning where students have 3 x 3 hour classes per week for 4 weeks. They are assessed each week in their supposed 'active learning' by what is described as authentic assessments..."

“This is an exhaustive schedule that has been demonstrated in the academic literature to have an onerous impact on the teaching staff. Very little time is possible for feedback, which will inevitably be rather generic and other feedback will be generalised, given in class.

“The claims that critical and independent thinking or deep learning are possible under these conditions are not adequately supported by the literature. This points to the necessity to make education free at all levels, to provide students with the necessary financial support to study, and to develop curriculum and learning design without consideration for the financial bottom line.”

In his report to the meeting, the other WSU-RFC co-convenor, longtime WSU educator Mike Head, said: “Not only are we facing a sharp attack on the jobs, conditions and teaching and learning of staff and students at The College.

“This is connected to the wider agenda of cuts to education, health care, housing and other social services, and that is bound up with preparations for war.

“Capitalist governments, including the Labor government in Australia, are pouring billions of dollars into AUKUS and other plans for war and they are already fully complicit in a monumental historic crime—the US-armed Israeli genocide in Palestine...

“Students and working-class households are already paying the price for this war drive in many ways, including through the soaring cost of living, fuelled by the impact of the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, and cuts to education and other social programs.”

Head said the heaviest course cuts at the WSU College were planned for English, arts, literature and humanities. “This will deprive more students of access to critical, broad-based courses, rather than just the narrow vocational ones demanded by employers and the government...

“This is part of the Labor’s pro-business Universities Accord. It demands the systemic restructuring of universities to satisfy the vocational and research requirements of big business, as well as AUKUS and other military programs.”

Head said: “Workers globally confront the same kinds of attacks. The rank-and-file committees are connected to the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, which provides global leadership and coordination to their struggles.”

Head said it was no accident that socialists, supporters of the Socialist Equality Party like himself and Zabala, had initiated the rank-and-file committee.

“It means fighting for what is necessary to meet the needs and interests of the working class, in Australia and internationally, the vast majority of the world’s population, not the profits of the corporate oligarchies and super-wealthy, and not their war drive.”

Head said rank-and-file committee membership did not require political agreement with socialism, however. The committees worked democratically, based on the demands agreed upon by the committee members. He said the initial demands of the WSU-RFC included:

- the scrapping of WSU’s restructuring
- the retention of all jobs, with no loss of pay or conditions
- no imposition of “block teaching”
- secure employment for all casualised and contract staff who want it
- free first-class education for all students, instead of channelling billions of dollars into AUKUS and other preparations for US-led wars

“We appeal to all of you to join and build our committee and participate in our campaign. It is not too late to defeat the shredding of WSU College. But to achieve that, we need your involvement.”

Key questions were raised in the question and discussion period. They included whether the cuts could still be reversed, given that the WSU management had already announced them, whether the committee should appeal to the new vice-chancellor, George Williams, to change the decision and whether the attack was the result of Western neo-liberalism.

In response, Zabala emphasised that struggle—that is, the committee’s campaign—would decide whether the cuts would be defeated, which they had to be. Head explained that the restructuring flowed from the government-corporate agenda of war and austerity, not individual university executives. Other participants pointed to the global character of the attacks on working-class social conditions, as seen in Kenya and Sri Lanka, where the austerity dictates of the International Monetary Fund had triggered mass protests.

During the discussion, Zach, a former WSU College student who is now the president of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) club at WSU, explained how important the courses at the college had been in preparing him for university study. He appealed to students to join the rank-and-file committee.

The WSU-RFC will meet this week to plan the next stage in the campaign. We appeal to all those who agree with us to join the committee. Contact us at: rfc.wsu@gmail.com



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