

Anatomy of a worsening betrayal: The NTEU's role at Western Sydney University College

A Western Sydney University Rank-and-File Committee member
11 December 2024

Since the beginning of the year, the pro-business restructure at Western Sydney University's preparatory college has already resulted in the loss of more than 10 percent of jobs, mostly academic teachers, a purging of experienced staff and a gutting of the Arts.

Throughout the entire period, Australia's main university union, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has prevented any organised struggle against the restructure. It is a case study in the union's role, setting a brutal precedent.

The union's only concern has been that management adhere to the union's retrograde 2022 enterprise agreement, whereby the NTEU promised to help implement any changes allegedly needed to make the WSU College "competitive in the market."

In fact, NTEU representatives attempted to remove from union meetings NTEU members who are College teachers and WSU academics, such as Gabriela Zabala and Mike Head, to block them from circulating resolutions to form a rank-and-file committee to fight the cuts.

In one instance, Zabala, one of the College educators threatened by the restructure, was removed from a Zoom meeting by WSU NTEU branch president David Burchell. Zabala was finally readmitted to the meeting after her colleagues advanced a procedural motion to require that.

Thus, the NTEU's primary concern at meetings was to limit any disruption to the restructure by the many affected and angry employees, while encouraging management to offer redundancies in order to quell opposition.

Given the economic rationale for the restructuring, however, management has refused to even grant

redundancies to some employees because of the cost.

Some employees who could not afford to wait to be approved for redundancy (at the discretion of management) have left the College. In other cases, experienced and longstanding staff members were not placed in new positions or ones of their choice.

In most instances, staff were subject to a "merit-based process" in which they have competed with their colleagues for the diminishing number of positions in the new structure. What has resulted is not so much a "spill and fill," but a purge.

Some staff have been advised that the only positions available to them are of lower status and lower pay. Those who opt for such jobs must, in effect, work the same hours for a pay cut, with only the first 12 months of the new position at their current salary before it drops to the highest level of the new position in the new structure.

While staff are not obliged to take positions of a lower status and pay, management, according to the 2022 enterprise agreement, is entitled to place an eligible employee "in a new or vacant position in the new structure if: a) the position is suitable; and b) the eligible employee agrees to the placement, with such agreement not to be unreasonably withheld."

In other words, staff can be placed in positions they do not want and possibly located on another campus. In some instances, affected staff who are "eligible" for redeployment have been pressured to make decisions about whether to accept a lower status job or request redundancy before January 1.

Alternatively, they can teach out the current diplomas, which may continue until the middle of next year, with no certainty of securing any position that

should emerge before they finish their current roles.

Another example of the regressive business model being implemented is that some roles which carry more responsibilities are paid less. Staff whose positions were “disestablished” and who have new jobs in the restructure, now have more duties. Sometimes they have assumed responsibility for several staff but are paid several thousands of dollars a year less than in their previous role.

Likewise, the curriculum writing for the new education diplomas has been outsourced to casual teachers. The pay for this onerous task of writing curriculum in a very short period of time, for block courses that run for four weeks, is not commensurate with the amount of work required.

The block mode of teaching will consist of three hours per day, three times a week over four-week intensive blocks. This means very heavy workloads for teachers and coordinators, with all assessments and marking done on a weekly basis and completed in a month.

For many casual teachers, such block work makes it impossible because they rely on work on a semester-by-semester basis at other institutions to make ends meet. It also erodes further the quality of the courses offered to students.

The NTEU has issued no statement criticising the restructure, nor any proposals to protest or to protect jobs. In fact, the NTEU has announced in meetings that it will address the restructure on a case-by-case basis and will not assist non-NTEU members.

As a result, employees are left to their own devices, compelled to compete against each other.

Instead of any fight against the restructure, the focus of recent NTEU meetings has been the negotiation of a new enterprise agreement, just like the one pushed through in 2022 to help the College to “change its structure, operations, and priorities to meet business requirements.”

At no point has the NTEU criticised the realignment of tertiary education with the Labor government’s pro-business Universities Accord, which calls for the reshaping of the entire sector to satisfy the employment and research needs of big business and the preparations for war, including the AUKUS military pact against China. In fact, the NTEU has shielded the Labor government from criticism, claiming instead that vice-

chancellors are using the international student cuts by the Labor government as a scare-mongering tactic to impose staff cuts.

The NTEU is playing a central role in stifling opposition by staff, as it did in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, when university managements, with the collaboration of the NTEU, attacked jobs across the sector.

Currently, more than 2,000 jobs are being eliminated at universities across the country. Programs are being decimated. Southern Cross University has announced the shuttering of its entire arts program.

The role of the NTEU in facilitating the restructure at the College is of a piece with the part it has played throughout the sector in preventing industrial action to protect jobs and collaborating with managements.

What is happening at the College illustrates the need for university staff, both academic and professional, to start organising independently of the unions who falsely claim to represent them. This is why the WSU Rank-and-File Committee was formed.

If the NTEU-backed restructuring is not defeated, it will set a benchmark for the entire sector.

We urge WSU staff and students who agree with this stand—whether union members or not—to help build the committee.

To discuss these issues and how to form rank-and-file committees, please contact us at rhc.wsu@gmail.com, or the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators’ network:

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact