

Amid Australian election, hundreds of jobs threatened at Western Sydney University

Mike Head, SEP candidate for the seat of Oxley
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In the midst of the Australian federal election campaign, Western Sydney University (WSU) management last week unveiled cuts and restructuring that are likely to destroy up to 400 jobs, or 15 percent of the institution's entire workforce.

Vice-chancellor George Williams held a staff webinar at which he spoke of university-wide redundancies, both so-called "voluntary" and non-voluntary. In addition, courses would be "reset," teaching and research would be "consolidated," campuses would be closed and hiring restrictions would continue.

When a staff member asked if this meant whole programs would be eliminated, Williams answered ominously: "I don't know." He spoke of "product review."

University administrations across the country have launched similar attacks in recent months, now targeting close to 3,000 jobs of academics and professional staff alike.

This offensive, now reaching WSU, where I work, flows directly from the Albanese Labor government's slashing of international student enrolments, its continued underfunding of the public universities and Labor's pro-business Universities Accord, which ties funding to meeting "national priorities," including employer demands and war preparations.

The WSU announcement, at a major university with a large working-class student enrolment, is another warning of what is to come once the election is over, regardless of which parties patch together the next government.

There will be wider and deeper cuts to public education and further restructuring to satisfy the requirements of the corporate elite and the AUKUS military buildup for a US-led war against China.

The WSU announcement follows the brutal precedent set by last year's gutting of the workforce at WSU College, the university's preparatory college, and the imposition of unbearable conditions on educators and students, cramming entire subjects into four-week blocks.

This confirms the warnings issued by the Socialist Equality Party-supported rank-and-file committees at WSU

and Sydney's Macquarie University that the WSU College restructuring is a test case for the kinds of conditions to be inflicted on the tertiary education sector as a whole unless there is a unified fight by staff and students against this historic assault.

At the staff webinar, Williams spoke of the impact of the cuts to international students, low domestic enrolments, competition from Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges with fee-free courses and now cheaper degrees, and the need to "reposition the university" to establish a point of pro-business differentiation labelled as "the Western Edge."

Williams expressed concern that if the Liberal-National Coalition won the election, there would be further caps on international students. But Labor is vying to outdo the Coalition on this front, as one every other.

Last December, the Labor government was so intent on cutting the numbers of international students that it resorted to issuing an arbitrary ministerial directive, despite warnings that it could be illegal.

Having failed to get its proposed student enrolment caps through parliament, the government issued immigration Ministerial Direction 111, which ordered the slowing of the processing of visas for overseas students once their intended university or other tertiary education provider hit 80 percent of the government's previously announced cap.

Direction 111 seeks to ensure that Labor achieves its goal of reducing enrolments by 53,000 (or 16 percent) on 2023 levels, eliminating thousands of jobs in the process in universities and private colleges.

This attack on international students forms part of Labor's plans to halve overseas migration to 235,000 annually for the next three years. The Coalition has vowed to cut annual net migration even further, to 160,000.

Albanese's government is seeking to outdo the openly right-wing Coalition in making international students, and immigrants more broadly, scapegoats for the worsening housing and cost-of-living crisis affecting millions of working-class households.

This is a reactionary nationalist drive to divide the working

class, just as the Trump regime is doing with its mass deportations. In Australia, as in the US, the social crisis is not caused by “foreigners.” It is rooted in the capitalist profit system itself, dominated by banks, billionaires, retail chains and property developers.

As a result of Labor’s measures, university managements everywhere are unveiling job cuts. These now include 400 at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), up to 650 at the Australian National University (ANU), 200 at the University of Canberra, at least 150 at the University of Wollongong and many more at other universities, such as Federation, James Cook, Southern Queensland, Griffith, La Trobe, Tasmania and Swinburne.

The leaderships of the main campus trade unions, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), have opposed any unified industrial action against this job destruction, just as they did during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, when they openly advocated accepting thousands of job losses.

Instead, together with the school education union bureaucrats, they are urging a vote for Labor in the May 3 federal election. They are falsely depicting Labor as the party of choice for education despite the Albanese government’s record of cutting public education funding in real terms, as well its agenda of suppressing anti-genocide and other campus and school dissent.

In line with this effort to prop up Labor, the NTEU branch leaders at WSU sought to whitewash Labor’s role and block industrial action at a branch meeting the day after Williams’ presentation.

NTEU branch president David Burchell even claimed that the university’s financial squeeze was not real—just an “invented improvised crisis as an excuse to cut jobs.” He sought to disarm and divert angry staff members by downplaying the prospect of job losses. According to Burchell, it was just a ploy for the upcoming enterprise bargaining talks between the managements and the unions.

Burchell insisted that job cuts could be averted by negotiating a “strong enterprise agreement,” even though such union agreements provide for retrenchments. He was backed by NTEU senior industrial officer Joshua Garva, who once again declared that no industrial action could be taken outside of union-controlled enterprise bargaining processes, as dictated by Labor’s Fair Work Act.

Garva also defended the “prerogative of management” to ask for expressions of interest in voluntary redundancies. This must be a warning. The NTEU has a long record of helping managements push people out the door via nominally “voluntary” redundancies, as it has done at WSU College.

Throughout the meeting there was no mention of Labor’s role, nor the wider political and ideological assault on universities, spearheaded by the Trump administration’s moves to cut off funding to US universities that do not comply with its fascistic agenda. The Trump White House is threatening to do the same to jointly US-funded researchers in Australia and internationally—sending out invasive questionnaires with which the Albanese government has urged researchers to comply!

Opposition exists throughout WSU, WSU College and all the universities to the job destruction, course closures, pro-corporate restructuring and suppression of dissent. But the union apparatuses have opposed any unified fight by university staff and students, as they have for decades.

That is why the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is calling for, and helping form, rank-and-file committees (RFCs) at universities. This is essential so that staff, along with students, can form their own organisations to develop and fight for demands based on the educational and financial needs of students and staff.

These RFCs can unite with educators and students globally via the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWS-RFC) for a common struggle against the capitalist system and its plunge into trade war, war and dictatorship.

Students everywhere must have the fundamental social right to a decent, all-round critical education, and educators and researchers must be free to conduct genuinely socially useful and scientifically important teaching and research.

To achieve that, what is needed is the development of a mass working-class party that raises the demand for the expropriation of the ultra-wealthy oligarchs to fund basic social needs, as part of the socialist reorganisation of society.

I urge all educators and students to read our election statement and get involved in the SEP’s election campaign to take forward this fight.

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