

Australian students protest against 'voluntary student unionism' legislation

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About 5,000 university students protested on Tuesday in cities and on university campuses across Australia against a new Higher Education Amendment Bill being introduced by the federal government. Known as "voluntary student unionism," the legislation will block funding to student unions and associations and effectively end or curtail most student services.

Currently students pay a compulsory enrolment fee, generally around \$300, at the beginning of each year and automatically become members of the student union. The money is used to finance student elections, student newspapers, clubs and societies, sporting facilities, student theatre, health care, child care, subsidised food and counselling.

Under the new legislation, not only will universal membership of student unions be banned, but the Liberal government plans to bar funding to all "non-academic" areas of university life. From the year 2000, any university financing student organisations or services "not directly related to the educational courses the student is enrolling in" will have its federal funding reduced or stopped.

Even the conservative Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee has spoken out against the legislation, pointing out that many of these "non-academic" areas--including student newspapers and elections--have been an integral part of university culture for more than a century.

In its overall thrust and logic "voluntary student unionism" (VSU) is commensurate with the new environment being established in universities, one in which higher education is increasingly the preserve of the wealthy. Education Minister David Kemp has declared the concepts of "universal membership" and "collective action" to be "arcane and obsolete". If students want access to non-academic services they will simply pay for them individually, runs the argument. But the supposedly "modern" ideas advanced by the Liberals, including "user-pays" and "individual rights," are ones that discriminate against poor and working class students.

The legislation will result in the removal of student input

and control over areas of university life. The proof lies in Western Australia (WA), where a similar version of VSU was introduced in 1994. The student association at Edith Cowan University is insolvent. Student newspapers in the state depend on advertising. At Murdoch University, there is no funding for clubs and societies while at Curtin University only \$30,000 is available (down from \$250,000). With the exception of the latter, not a single student union in the state can afford to employ research officers. The loss of funding has forced the closure of services such as those for overseas students, part-time and mature age students and students with disabilities. As well, funding is no longer available for student theatre and film nights.

VSU has been a pet project of Liberal student clubs and of elements within the parent Liberal Party for well over two decades. Liberal hostility to student unions and associations was provoked by the radicalisation of young people during the late 1960s and early 1970s, which saw active support for Labor Party and left-wing student clubs, the election of "left" leaderships in campus elections and the formation of a national student union (the Australian Union of Students, or AUS, and then the National Union of Students, or NUS).

The student radicalisation was part of a broad upsurge of the working class, which led to the election of the first Labor government in 23 years and culminated in a series of reforms, including the establishment of free tertiary education. While tuition fees were eliminated, however, the Whitlam Labor government maintained an annual enrollment fee to finance student unions and campus services. It is this compulsory fee which the Howard government is now moving to abolish. (Under Whitlam and the subsequent Liberal government of Malcolm Fraser, poorer students were provided a modest grant toward the cost of this enrollment fee. The Hawke Labor government abolished the grant in 1987.)

Once a fringe policy largely directed against Labor influence on campus, VSU has now moved to centre stage and takes on a broader and more sinister logic. It aims at stifling political and cultural dissent and imposing an

intellectually sanitised environment on the campuses. In 1994 when VSU was introduced in WA and Victoria, a Liberal party briefing document stated: "We do not want compulsory student monies flowing out to anti-Kennett and anti-Coalition (Liberal-National Party) campaigns and other fringe activities of the hard left." This year at a briefing to fellow federal backbenchers, senior Liberals spoke of truncating "the culture of compulsory unionism ... before people enter the workforce" and attacked student unions for donating to political causes including the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

While VSU has been official Liberal Party policy since the early 1980s, it is being introduced in 1999 in the context of the largest cuts in history to university funding. Faculties are still reeling from the impact of the August 1996 Budget with at least \$600 million cut from university operating grants in barely three years. To examine just one university--Monash--and its Faculty of Arts: 49 staff positions were lost in 1998 through "Voluntary Early Retirement" packages, 241 subjects have been cut and the entire Classics Department has been closed.

The Howard government has also dramatically lifted the tuition fees that students must pay under the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) introduced by the Hawke Labor government in the 1980s, and reduced Austudy student allowances.

But greater changes lie ahead. The Liberals plan to privatise universities and have floated various models for full, up-front fees, including a so-called voucher system--a scheme first touted in Australia by the Labor Party's Peter Baldwin. Significant cuts to federally-funded student places are in the pipeline, with the aim of forcing desperate students to pay thousands of dollars for a place. The University of Melbourne is in the process of building a new university to be known simply as "Melbourne University Private".

The VSU legislation is part of the preparation for this new regime. The vast majority of students defend the concept of free and accessible higher education and have opposed the ever-wider encroachment of "user-pays" under successive Labor and Liberal governments. That is why the Liberals are compelled to ram through legislation to forcibly gag and dismantle democratically elected student organisations.

At the anti-VSU rally in Sydney, the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed a third-year Early Childhood Education student from Macarthur campus of the University of Western Sydney. "I'm here protesting today because I'm worried about the attempts by the government to bring in up-front fees," he said. "Howard will utilise 'voluntary student unionism' to silence political opposition in order to clear the way for full fees to be introduced."

"Many students are not aware of the implications of VSU.

It is aimed at silencing students because student groups have always opposed government legislation attacking education. The government is putting the needs of the economy before people. Policies should be based on humanitarianism.

"At our university we are facing class overcrowding. Universities are under pressure to enrol more and more students to attract funding. I'm in my third year and we are suffering in the ways we are being taught.

"There are many problems developing. For instance at UWS Macarthur there is no disability access for students. The student association has been requesting these facilities for years but because of the cuts in funding the university administration says they cannot provide the funds. Many faculties now don't provide photocopies of material needed for courses. Students now have to pay for their own. It's costing hundreds of dollars for students every year.

"I now have to work part-time to pay the rent. The Austudy allowance is not enough. I'm a mature age student but many students I know that are under the age of 25, who have been put on Youth Allowance, are dropping out of courses because they can't afford to stay at Uni. Many are converting to part-time so they can try and work full-time to survive.

"The cuts in funding are leading to the closure of courses and departments and a reduction in subjects offered. One way of driving students out is to make conditions at the universities unbearable and open it up for mainly fee-paying students. We have to force some change."



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