

Australia:

State Labor government tries to hide cuts to Technical and Further Education

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Despite efforts by the Labor Party government in the Australian state of New South Wales to prevent its plans becoming known, leaked documents surfaced last week outlining the axing of 630 jobs from Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges. The government has secretly ordered a \$43 million cut to TAFE's \$923 million teaching budget this financial year.

A confidential internal memo proposed that information about the cuts be announced separately at each of the 12 TAFE institutes to avoid any statewide campaign against them. "While it would be naïve to suggest that the jigsaw will not eventually be pieced together the timely provision of information at a local level will assist in defusing any statewide campaign," it stated.

One reason for the nervousness is obvious. Only a few months ago, during the last state election, Labor leader Bob Carr styled himself the "education premier," promising thousands of new apprenticeships and traineeships and boasting that his government had raised literacy levels. Having survived the poll, the government has moved almost immediately to slash TAFE New South Wales, the largest vocational, educational and training system in Australia, enrolling over 400,000 students annually.

The leaked memo shows the type of discussions that occur behind closed doors at the highest levels. It urges the utilisation of local media outlets to divert the anger of teachers and students away from the government and towards a competitive struggle between TAFE Institutes, individual colleges and private companies that are tendering to supply lower-cost courses.

"Local media are more receptive in using prepared

media materials and enable us to deliver a strong message that 'for this institute to survive, these are the things which we must do'," the document states. "Locally, TAFE teachers and support staff recognise the threat posed by private providers and are equally as likely to recognise local efficiencies. These will not be so easily communicated—or accepted—if presented at a statewide level."

Thus, the TAFE institutes and their staff will have to compete against each other to find areas to be cut. Certain specific areas have been earmarked. A teacher at the South Western Institute told the *World Socialist Web Site* that staff were handed a letter on July 27 by the Institute Director outlining "course cost reductions of 7 percent across the Institute and for some course areas 10 percent". Panel beating, vehicle painting, mechanical engineering courses were to be wound down, along with fitting and machining. Class support services were to be subjected to "further streamlining". Administrative jobs in finance and human resource were to be cut.

The Labor leaders, as well as their federal counterparts in the Liberal-National Party federal government, increasingly claim that young people and their parents are responsible for the high levels of unemployment, welfare dependency and poverty among youth. They insist that in order to improve their situation, young people must more diligently educate themselves.

At the same time, governments are continuously cutting back welfare payments and programs for unemployed youth and trying to force them into "work-for-the-dole" schemes, claiming that these will lead to jobs. Meanwhile, all avenues for proper training are

being gutted. The TAFE cuts follow the earlier abolition of most government-funded training programs.

Already, over the past decade, TAFE operations have been increasingly privatised, as part of a wider drive to replace the public provision of tertiary education with a contracted-out system of “user-pays”. TAFE budgets have been slashed, and staff numbers and working conditions axed. Student courses deemed to be not “cost effective” have been eliminated.

According to the NSW teachers union journal *Education*, federal government cutbacks since 1996 have resulted in \$400 million in budget cuts to NSW TAFE between 1996 and 2000. To this, the Carr government has added its own sweeping cuts. A leaflet handed to delegates at the NSW Teachers Federation annual conference in July outlined the effects of the recent state budget on TAFE institutes. They included:

- * cuts to enrolments and courses for the remainder of 1999

- * a 10 percent cut to trade courses at the South Western Sydney Institute

- * an \$18 million cut to the Sydney Institute, with entire sections being closed down

- * a \$3 million cut to Educational Services Divisions, affecting curriculum development and maintenance

- * cuts to access and equity courses at the Western Sydney Institute

- * deregulated teacher-student ratios, meaning increased class sizes

Hundreds of jobs had already been lost in TAFE restructures during the 1990s. In 1991 330 TAFE head office jobs were axed when the current TAFE institutes replaced the previous 24 colleges. In 1992 a further restructure saw 200 positions removed through voluntary redundancies. Another restructure in 1995 led to a cut of 310 jobs.

Through these cuts and other measures, Labor and Liberal governments alike have forced TAFE to fight for survival with private operators in a cutthroat market. National competition policy means that TAFE colleges also have to compete with secondary schools and universities to attract enrolments. Funding for vocational education, generated by the national government, is allocated to the states on the basis of so-called benchmarking. Whichever state spends the least on training programs becomes the standard that other

states must match.

As a result, cheaper part-time casual teachers are steadily replacing permanent full-time teachers. In 1980 part-time teachers taught 30 percent of TAFE classes. The figure is now 50 percent. Hiring costs for part-time teachers are estimated to be half that for full-time teachers. In addition, teachers' working conditions have been progressively dismantled. Time previously allocated for lesson preparation, individual student guidance and counselling has been almost eliminated.

In some cases, low-wage “facilitators” are being employed, often without teaching qualifications, to distribute individual modules to students. Such facilitators are expected to instruct up to 20 students in three-hour lessons on the contents of different training packages. Students who need assistance have to wait in line for the facilitator's attention.

Along with this, class sizes have increased, students levied with higher fees, staff working hours widened and annual holidays cut.

The NSW Teachers Federation claimed that it was informed only at the last minute about the new cutbacks, even though the cuts were foreshadowed by last month's state budget. The executive of the union's TAFE branch estimates the cuts in real terms to be \$67 million, because the government has demanded a student enrolment increase of 10,700, to be funded through staff cuts, increased class sizes and other cuts to services.

The union has issued statements opposing the cuts and entered into discussions with the government. However, a statement issued by its executive criticised the cutbacks on the grounds that they would “reduce the competitiveness of TAFE in the training market”. In other words, the union accepts the basic framework of the market, which treats education not as a fundamental right but a commodity to be bought and sold for private profit.



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