

Staff strike and student protests highlight crisis in New Zealand universities

John Braddock
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The first of two planned 24-hour strikes by 700 staff at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand took place last Thursday. Lecturers, librarians and laboratory technicians participated in the stoppage in support of their demand for a \$NZ2,000 pay increase. They unanimously passed a vote of no confidence in Vice Chancellor Michael Irving and rejected the university's counter-offer of no rise in wages. The only previous strike at Victoria University was in 1995.

Underlying demands for increased pay were also broader concerns about the erosion of tertiary education in New Zealand. The President of the Association of University Staff (AUS), Law Professor Jane Kelsey, attacked government funding cuts and rampant managerialism which she said threatened to "destroy the soul of New Zealand's universities" and make them "outcasts in the international education community".

Kelsey said that the government's market-driven assault on tertiary education had already caused serious permanent damage. "But it is compounded by the attitude of many vice-chancellors, who treat universities like a commercial business and exclude their staff from any active role in critical decisions," she added.

History lecturer Kate Hunter said that an AUS-commissioned study had shown that the core functions of the university—teaching and research—were being starved of funds at the expense of increased spending on administration, which now consumed 29 percent of the university's total budget.

A leaked memorandum from the Vice Chancellor's office claimed that the staff's pay increase would cost \$3 million a year. As a result, the administration would have to put up annual student fees by \$300 or make the equivalent of 50 full-time staff redundant.

About 100 students, however, occupied the

university's registry building in support of the staff pay claim and to back students at Canterbury University in Christchurch engaged in a similar occupation to protest against increased fees.

Canterbury University Council has proposed to increase fees by 45 percent next year. The governing council met during the course of the occupation and decided on an average increase of 31 percent, the precise amount varying from department to department.

Student demonstrations have also taken place in other parts of the country as university and polytechnic councils are due to meet to set fee levels for next year.

The lack of funding for tertiary institutions is part of a prolonged assault on public education over the last two decades by governments of all political stripes. Continuous cutbacks in government financing have forced university administrations to impose student fees and seek out sponsorship from big business.

Since 1991 the conservative National Party government has limited its funding of university running costs to a maximum of 70 percent. However, as a Canterbury University spokesman pointed out last week, in reality the government was meeting just over 50 percent of the budget.

Students and staff have borne the brunt of these austerity measures. Tuition fees, first introduced by Labour governments in the 1980s, have risen steeply over the past few years. The cheapest undergraduate courses now cost at least \$3,500 per year, with more expensive courses such as medicine and veterinary science exceeding \$8,000.

As a result, tertiary education is increasingly the preserve of the wealthy elite. A study carried out by Auckland University showed that enrolments from the university's poorest contributing schools in South Auckland and rural Northland had fallen by 23 percent

between 1994 and 1997. In contrast, enrolments from the wealthiest catchment areas increased by 25 percent.

Staff workloads and working conditions have suffered significantly. Staff-student ratios have deteriorated to the point where overcrowding in lecture theatres is commonplace. In some courses, students are forced to sit on the steps or miss out altogether.

The salaries of lecturers have fallen below those of secondary school teachers. Tutorials and marking are frequently undertaken by part-time and temporarily employed academics who are paid less than \$10 per hour. Yet tertiary institutions continue to face a financial crisis. Earlier this year, Auckland University announced that it would sack 100 staff after a \$30 million blowout in its budget.

Tertiary Education Minister Max Bradford initially refused to comment on the staff strike and student protests. He claimed that fee levels had nothing to do with the government, saying universities were self-governing institutions. Subsequently, however, he tried to blame university administrations, declaring in the case of Canterbury that an extravagant \$100 million building program was the reason for the fee rise.

The Labour Party, however, has no plans to provide any significant increase in funding to universities if it comes to power after national election in November. Speaking to students at Victoria University last week, Labour leader Helen Clark promised only to marginally reduce the level of interest repayment on the student loans scheme.



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