

Teachers and students fight to save a technical college in Sydney

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18 January 2000

Teachers, students and local supporters are into their fourth week of picketing to protest the closure of Seaforth Technical and Further Education (TAFE) College, in Sydney's northern suburbs. The institution was officially shut down on December 17, as a direct consequence of the New South Wales Labor government's funding cuts to TAFE, announced in the June 1999 budget.

Over the past five years hundreds of millions of dollars have been sliced from TAFE finances in the state of NSW as federal and state governments increasingly force public tertiary colleges and institutions, along with schools and universities, to compete for funds and students. In the latest round the Carr Labor government ordered a \$43 million reduction in TAFE's \$923 million teaching budget and the axing of 630 jobs.

A confidential internal memo, leaked to the media a month after the budget, revealed how the government planned to minimise the resulting political fall-out. Each of the 12 TAFE Institutes in NSW was to identify its own areas to be slashed and then announce the cuts “at a local level” in order to “assist in defusing any statewide campaign” against the government.

In other words, if kept isolated, teachers were more likely to accept that “for this institute to survive, these are the things that we must do”. As the document continued, “Locally, TAFE teachers and support staff recognise the threat posed by private providers and are equally likely to recognise local efficiencies. These will not be so easily communicated—or accepted—if presented at a statewide level.”

A few weeks later, on August 19 last year, the Acting Director of the Northern Sydney Institute of TAFE (NSIT)—the institute responsible for Seaforth TAFE College—informed the staff that the campus would be shut down at the end of the year.

According to the Save Seaforth TAFE committee's web site, the director, K. Sivakumar, said: “NSIT has to save

\$4 million so we are closing Seaforth TAFE campus.” One option was to sell the site for \$5 million.

Since the closure's announcement, outraged teachers and students have been working to overturn the decision, winning support in the area and getting considerable publicity from the local media along with some coverage in the Sydney press. This led to the setting up of a NSW Parliament Upper House Committee, which recommended a halt to the closure pending “community consultation”—a mechanism used time and again to carry through government cuts.

A picket line was established on December 15 to prevent the removal of the college's facilities and resources and to provide information on courses and enrolment dates for this year. The Save Seaforth committee aims to pressure the NSW Education Department into reversing the decision to shut the college.

The Labor government itself has publicly defended the closure. In a letter to the local MP, David Barr, on December 23, Education Minister John Aquilina cited a steady decline in student numbers and the need to spend \$400,000 on essential works to Seaforth TAFE buildings.

Both these claims are false. Jim Bannister, a long-time teacher at Seaforth TAFE and a member of the Save Seaforth committee, told the *World Socialist Web Site* it was a “big lie” that student numbers were falling. “In 1998, student enrolments stood at 1,697 while in 1999 they had gone up to 1,787.” The Seaforth committee also denied that the college buildings required the outlay of huge sums. The architect responsible for refurbishing the buildings in 1985 has stated that the buildings are in good condition.

While most courses offered at Seaforth TAFE would be available within the region, some would be eliminated. Travel times would increase considerably and in some cases students would have to travel up to three hours across town. Seaforth's 35 full-time teachers have been

offered positions at other campuses but many part-time teachers have not been offered work.

Seaforth TAFE College particularly caters for mature-aged female students, as well as disabled and migrant students and young people returning to complete their formal examinations. This last group of students will be the most disadvantaged because the Education Department has refused to guarantee that they can study the same subjects in their Certificate of General Education (CGE) course at the nearest college in Brookvale.

In a letter to the Education Minister, one 16-year-old student, Katrin, wrote that she had “tried twice to do my Year 10 at school but obviously I failed. The school environment did not suit me and I rebelled against it. I didn't feel that I counted as an individual... A lot of us cannot afford the time and cost (\$500-\$600 for transport for the year) to travel to North Sydney or Hornsby. It is simply too far away... Surely all Australians, not just the rich, should have access to a good education system.”

Another Year 10 student, Brooke, wrote: “Since I've attended Seaforth my life has changed for the better. The teachers have the greatest respect for students and treat each student individually. The facilities are also terrific. The classrooms are well equipped and comfortable. There's a great library and access to computers... Due to its small size and friendly environment I have felt motivated to study and complete the CGE course.”

The campaign being undertaken by the Save Seaforth TAFE committee is significant because it emphasises that the closure is part of a wider attack on public education. Banners at the picket read “Saving public education starts with saving Seaforth TAFE,” “Public assets not for sale” and “Public land for public education.”



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