

Australian government launches new offensive against university staff and students

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The Howard government has embarked on a major confrontation with university staff and students in order to push through its plans for a radical restructuring of universities. Two weeks ago, it unveiled its cynically named Higher Education Support Bill (HESB), which will dramatically increase student fees. Days later, it announced a new industrial relations regime, effectively scrapping all restrictions on the driving down of salaries and conditions for academics and university workers.

On September 17, Education Minister Brendan Nelson tabled an “enhanced” HESB, rejecting calls for any compromise on its central thrust, which was first outlined in the May Budget. Despite opposition from students and staff, as well as from some universities, and criticism by the official opposition parties in the Senate, Nelson declared he would not contemplate changes that “undermine the fundamental integrity of the package”.

The two central measures will stand—allowing universities to increase student fees under the HECS repayment scheme by up to 30 percent, and doubling the proportion of university places open to full-fee paying students from 25 to 50 percent.

These “user-pays” measures will add to the already near-impossible financial burden on ordinary students and their families, while at the same time allowing increased numbers of wealthier students to buy university places. The upshot will be a two-class university system, with elite institutions for those who can afford to pay, and poorly-funded rump universities for the rest.

New funding formulae will mean that newer universities, such as the University of Western Sydney and the Victoria University of Technology, attended by thousands of working class students, will lose millions of dollars per year. Overall, 8,000 extra students will be denied university places around Australia each year, on top of an existing shortfall of up to 30,000 places. Thousands more are expected to drop out for financial reasons.

One of Nelson’s “enhancements” consists of encouraging cash-strapped regional universities to provide “distance

learning” courses via the Internet, a measure that will further undermine the provision of full, on-campus, study. A few sops include extending slightly the time limits for students to complete their degrees, allowing struggling universities to over-enrol by up to five percent and exempting scholarship holders from social security income tests.

Hidden away in the 265-page bill are far-reaching powers for the minister to dictate what courses and degrees the country’s 38 public universities can offer, and how many student places they can provide, in line with “national priorities” set by the government. These powers will be used to further boost narrowly-based commercial, professional and vocational courses at the expense of arts, humanities and other courses involving historical study and critical reflection.

Under “governance reform protocols”—which have received no media coverage—university governing councils will be required to restructure themselves along corporate lines, focusing on the acquisition of “commercial expertise”.

In another little-known provision, low-interest loans will be offered to full-fee paying students to encourage them to attend one of the many private institutions that have sprung up over the past two decades, such as Bond University, the University of Notre Dame, the Australian Institute of Music, Tabor College and the Christian Heritage College.

Five days after tabling the bill, Nelson and outgoing Workplace Relations Minister Tony Abbott jointly revealed “new workplace relations requirements for universities”.

Their announcement was timed to scuttle a three-year collective agreement about to be signed between Sydney University and the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and to sink negotiations and industrial campaigns underway at most other public universities. The two ministers declared that the “requirements” would operate immediately, even though the necessary legislation had not yet been introduced.

The purpose of the announcement was to deliver an ultimatum to university managements. In order to qualify for a share of the \$404 million in federal funding over three

years, they would have to draw up individual contracts with academics and other employees to undercut collective agreements, drop all limits on the hiring of casual and limited-term contract staff, and introduce performance pay systems to tie salaries to commercially-rewarding outputs.

Nelson and Abbott also foreshadowed measures, likely to be announced by Abbott's successor, Kevin Andrews, to strip academics of the right to strike, even after the expiry of a collective agreement. The provisions will allow the Industrial Relations Commission to outlaw industrial action that "seriously disadvantages third parties". This power will be used to ban stoppages that will allegedly affect students.

Under the new regime, universities must steadily replace all collective agreements with individual contracts. This will mean the dismantling of the current minimal provisions relating to termination, tenure, academic freedom, redundancy payments, maternity leave, and study leave. It will intensify the imposition of low-paid and insecure casual labour, which already accounts for 25 percent of all academic labour and half of the total university workforce.

While scrapping minimum standards for most university staff, the new rules will facilitate the awarding of superior conditions to high-profile academics and handpicked employees in the elite universities, accelerating the divide into a two-tiered system.

The government hopes to bludgeon universities into enforcing the new requirements by starving them of funds if they fail to comply. The \$404 million is part of a larger sum of \$1.5 billion being offered to the universities over four years. Yet, according to media estimates, the funding plan will still leave universities \$3 billion a year worse off than when the Howard government took office in 1996.

The September 22 industrial relations ultimatum triggered immediate conflict when Sydney University management cancelled the formal signing of its enterprise agreement with the NTEU, scheduled for the following day. Vice-Chancellor Gavin Brown claimed that the new rules necessitated the shelving of the agreement, reneging on the results of negotiations conducted since October 2002.

Angry staff held a two-hour stoppage and voted unanimously for two weeks of industrial action and a 24-hour strike on October 7 to demand the reversal of Brown's decision.

The NTEU Council then called a national 24-hour strike on October 16 to defend the current bargaining process underway at all universities. This will be the first national strike since 1996, when the Howard government slashed \$600 million from university spending in its first budget.

NTEU general secretary Grahame McCulloch said the strike call "signals our determination to maintain not only the pay and working conditions of staff, but to preserve the

quality of education our members provide to students".

The union has depicted the industrial relations requirements as "nothing more than an ideological vendetta on the part of the government" which would "do nothing to improve the quality of teaching and research". Together with the National Union of Students, it has urged staff and students to lobby the Labor Party and the two smaller Senate opposition parties, the Australian Democrats and Greens, to block or modify the proposals.

But the latest offensive flows directly from the economic restructuring agenda spearheaded by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments and backed by the trade unions between 1983 and 1996. The agenda includes gutting public education and other social spending, reducing business and high-income taxation and turning universities into profit-generating businesses that serve corporate interests.

Fees for overseas students were introduced by the Hawke government, and then extended in the late 1980s to domestic students—first post-graduates and then undergraduates, ending a decade or so of free university education. Labor also began the process of transforming tertiary education into a money-spinning and export-earning industry. The Howard government has merely followed in its footsteps.

The NTEU's track record has been one of accommodating itself to these requirements, presiding over enterprise bargaining agreements that have traded off traditional conditions, allowed academic salaries to slip by 25 percent compared to average weekly earnings since the early 1980s, and permitted student-staff ratios to deteriorate from 14.5 in 1993 to 19.9 in 2001.

The Howard government is now exploiting these deteriorating conditions to declare that the only way to save the universities from prevailing "mediocrity" is to expose them to unmitigated market forces. The results will deprive hundreds of thousands of students of the right to higher education.



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