

National strike closes universities across Australia

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Most of the 40,000 academic and general staff employed at Australia's public universities supported a nation-wide strike on October 16, largely closing down the higher education system. Throughout the morning, staff and their supporters maintained picket-lines at university entrances and some 10,000 took part in lunch-time rallies and marches around the country.

The action was called by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and six other unions to protest against the Howard government's ultimatum last month that university managements implement specific changes to their workplace relations. The government has demanded that the universities refuse to enter into any industrial agreement that bars university employees signing an individual Australian Workplace Agreement (AWA) or places limits on the number of casuals and short-term contract staff that can be hired. If universities do not agree to these demands, the government is threatening to deny them a share in an extra \$404 million allocated in its budget to higher education.

At present, the collective agreements negotiated between universities and the NTEU apply to all employees and include specified limits on the use of casual labour. The NTEU has consistently adapted to government and management cost-cutting drives and signed off on agreements that have eroded the working conditions of university staff. The maintenance of collectivity, however, remains an obstacle to the government's push to introduce performance-based employment packages into the universities.

The government's agenda is to create conditions in which an academic's tenure, salary, academic freedom, redundancy, maternity leave and study leave can diverge wildly between universities and between individuals within faculties and departments. As part of its drive to break-up collective bargaining, the government has also demanded that universities "must not encourage or signal support for union membership".

Other aspects of the government's proposed education policies may see the debts billed to students under the

Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) increase by as much as 30 percent next year. Universities will be permitted to offer increasing numbers of course places to domestic students who have the resources to pay the same up-front fees charged to international students. The Howard government is also attempting to give the Education Ministry unprecedented powers to influence how many places are offered for particular courses at universities, and whether certain courses are even offered at all.

Only two of Australia's 38 public universities did not face strike action. The Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra had gone into negotiations with the NTEU and was exempted, while the University of New South Wales in Sydney won an industrial court ruling barring its employees from striking. Nevertheless, some UNSW staff took part in the protests.

At the rallies around the country, NTEU speakers hailed the decision by the ANU to sign a new collective agreement with the union that day. They also put the position that the opposition parties controlling the Senate would most likely block the government's higher education legislation as long as it included the workplace relations ultimatum. Labor, Green and Democrat senators moved a motion on October 16 supporting the strike. The unions are therefore hoping that more universities will decide to ignore the government threats and continue enterprise agreement negotiations.

In Sydney, over 2,000 people from various universities assembled at the University of Sydney where representatives of the NTEU, other unions and the student council condemned the plans to introduce AWAs and other aspects of the government's education policies. Following the rally, staff and students marched several kilometers through the centre of Sydney to Belmore Park. Workers carried placards declaring "Quality staff deserve quality pay", "Our workplace rights are not for sale" and "Howard is an industrial blackmailer".

The WSWS interviewed academics, general staff workers and students as they picketed at both the University of Sydney and University of Western Sydney. All of them

expressed opposition to the government's agenda and their wider concerns about the deteriorating state of higher education.

Liz Tancred, a lecturer in Medicine at the University of New South Wales, condemned "linking university funding with workplace reform" as "immoral and manipulative".

"Currently, the AWA contracts can't undercut the enterprise agreements that cover us. It will lead to a divergence in conditions. It is very hard to get an academic position, and the management will be able to hold people over a barrel. The government plans would give them the power to do that.

"What we've lost from the funding cuts is not so much academic staff, but we've lost most of our support staff. It means we are working longer hours and doing tasks that would have been done by general staff. I do a lot of work setting up labs for example. Previously I had someone to do it for me."

Elias Moudawar, the attendant-in-charge of the Anderson Stuart complex at University of Sydney, said the permanent general staff were "worried about our survival".

"Some of us have been working here for a long time—21 years on my part—and we've never had this type of attack. This is industrial blackmail. There are about 2,000 general staff at University of Sydney. There have been efforts to replace permanent jobs with casuals. Areas of work have been given to contracting companies. There are limits on that at the moment but if the government gets their way, there will be no limits."

Evan Jones, a lecturer at the University of Sydney Economics and Business Faculty labeled the attempt to link the imposition of AWAs to the education budget as a "scandal". "The higher education system has already been under fiscal pressure for some time," he said. "There are cuts in staff numbers in the humanities, in the Arts faculty. In our area, our workloads are increasing. We've been privileged in the sense that we have benefited from fee-paying students, but the demands of teaching poorly-qualified overseas students is draining."

Anne Boyd, a senior Professor in Music, spoke about the cutbacks to the Arts Faculty at the University of Sydney. The impact of funding reductions on her department was the focus of the 2001 documentary *Facing the Music*.

"For over a decade I've had to face cut after cut, year after year. We've seen the quality ripped out of our curriculum and it is university-wide. We lost \$1.6 billion from the budget cuts in 1996. It has never been returned. I've seen class sizes balloon out to the point where you can't treat students as individuals. In Music, we have lost 75 percent of our curriculum. When I started here we had something like 74 courses. We are now down to about 15. History is almost

the same—it has lost more than half of its staff.

"Nationally, academics are sick of the conditions in which we have been forced to work. We are sickened knowing that we are giving our students a more and more second rate education. It takes money to have one-on-one tutorials. It takes money to run small courses that are nevertheless hugely valuable. I have seen universities change from collegiums to pseudo-corporations. The government has tried to turn us into institutions that count the bottom line as more important than the search for truth."

Bettina Frankham, a media student at the University of Sydney and an employee of the student representative council, said the government's policies were not only aimed at cost-cutting, but were "ideologically motivated". She condemned the plans to give the Education Ministry greater power over what courses are offered: "They are an attempt to silence voices of dissent by directing people into vocational orientated courses. In my field of media there is expected to be much more of an industry-based emphasis and not as much room for broader experimentation or research."

Jacqueline Barker, who works for the post-graduate students association at the Parramatta campus of the University of Western Sydney (UWS) described how after working full-time for four years she was still \$10,000 in debt from the HECS fee scheme: "We are telling the students that this strike is in their interests and those of future generations. It might be hard for some of them to see that, but how much will they have to pay for their children's education in 20 years' time?"

A process of bartering is now underway in the parliament and between the unions and university managements over the government's latest measures. What will not be addressed, however, is the shattering of the right to free and high quality higher education that has been underway over the past two decades.



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