

Australia: the issues at stake in the dismantling of student unions

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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Tertiary students around Australia are justifiably concerned about the Howard government's proposed "voluntary student unionism" (VSU) legislation, which will gut student unions by banning the collection of upfront fees.

Education Minister Brendan Nelson has declared his intention of proceeding with the Higher Education Support (Abolition of Compulsory Upfront Student Unions Fees) Bill 2005 in the current session of parliament. Under the banner of supporting individual choice, the Bill will destroy the basis for student unions and a range of welfare services and cultural, sporting and political activities that they have supported.

The VSU legislation is a direct assault on the democratic right of students to elect and run their own organisations. It prohibits universities from charging any fees not directly related to academic courses of study. Institutions will face crippling fines of \$100 per student if they collect levies or charges that in any way finance student unions, associations, clubs or services.

Nelson insists that outlawing compulsory fees, worth about \$160 million annually, will restore students' rights of freedom of association. "We believe in this, particularly in the 21st century, that when students cross the road and walk into a university campus they should not have compulsorily removed from their hard-earned money, compulsory upfront union fees," he said.

The government's approach to student unions is the same as on every other social issue. Just as it intends to ban the collection of student union fees so it has slashed taxes for the wealthy, arguing that they should not have to pay for services they do not use. Every aspect of public life is being sacrificed on the altar of corporate profit. At one pole of society, the privileged few can afford first class private services, while at the other pole, the majority are forced to rely on public health, education and other services that have been starved of funds and cut to the bone.

Applied to university education, this rationale has meant the imposition of onerous fees that leave graduates saddled with a mountain of debt. Cutbacks to university funding have forced tertiary institutions to turn to corporate sources of funding and the allocation of more places to full-fee paying students—both Australian and from overseas. While the wealthy can buy university places for their sons and daughters, most young people are finding it increasingly difficult to afford access to higher education.

When he declares that students should be allowed to keep their "hard-earned money," Nelson is not, of course, suggesting a return to the 1970s when there were no tuition fees and when living allowances, though limited, permitted time to study and engage in campus activities. If Nelson can assert that students should not have to pay for

services they do not use, it is because two decades of savage attacks on tertiary education have largely destroyed campus life.

Starting with the Hawke Labor government in 1987, successive governments have reintroduced and steadily raised tuition fees and slashed living allowances. As a result, except for the well-off few, students have been forced to take jobs, usually poorly paid, to survive financially. On average, students now work 15 hours a week, three times the level in 1984. They spend little time on campus, attending only a bare minimum of compulsory classes, which they squeeze in between their working hours.

In the process, the very character of university education is being transformed. When student union fees first began to be levied in the 1920s, Australian universities were guided by the longstanding traditions of educational institutions in Britain and elsewhere that paid attention to the all-rounded intellectual, social and cultural development of students. Informal education, through participation in clubs and societies covering a broad range of activities from music and drama to football and rock climbing, as well as in various forums for the discussion of diverse ideas, was considered an essential component of university life.

It is a sign of today's climate of political reaction that such considerations are not even seriously debated. Increasingly universities have abandoned any notion of a community of scholars dedicated to nurturing the interests and abilities of students and have become degree factories narrowly focussed on imparting marketable vocational skills to those who can pay. The stifling of discussion in universities finds its parallel in the degeneration of broader public debate where government lies remain unchallenged and the media fosters and encourages all manner of backwardness and ignorance.

A key aim of the VSU legislation is to stamp out the political activities of student unions. While criticising the Bill, Labor's shadow education minister Jenny Macklin treats it dismissively as "just an ideological attack by a government determined to settle a very old score".

It is certainly the case that the Howard government includes political figures who reacted to the eruption of student protests in the 1960s and 1970s by demanding the dismantling of student unions. They were deeply concerned about the potential danger of the student movement against the Vietnam War linking up with a broader upsurge of the working class over working conditions and democratic rights.

However, it is not just "old scores" that the Howard government is out to settle. Rather the VSU legislation reflects fears in ruling circles that there are signs of a new period of student radicalisation. Students have not only consistently opposed the imposition of tuition fees and the undermining of university education but in recent years have been

prominent in anti-globalisation demonstrations and the mass protests against the criminal US-led invasion of Iraq.

The concern is not so much with the present crop of student leaders, who are, by and large, budding Labor Party careerists and their “left” allies among various middle class radical organisations such as Socialist Alliance. These layers have consistently stifled opposition among students to the attacks of Labor and Coalition governments on education. Rather, the fear is that a period of political ferment will, as in the 1960s and 1970s, rapidly shift the centre of gravity of debate, leaving student bureaucrats isolated as students become more critical of the capitalist order and sympathetic to revolutionary ideas.

Significantly, the parliamentary opponents of the VSU Bill also support a ban on the involvement of student unions in political activities. In a statement issued on Monday, Macklin declared the Labor Party was willing to “compromise” on the legislation by allowing student union fees to be collected for a range of welfare and other services, sporting clubs and student advocacy—but specifically omitting broader political campaigns.

Macklin’s statement is an obvious overture to National Party backbenchers and Independent MPs, as well as the university vice-chancellors, who have proposed “VSU-lite” models. Reflecting concerns about the impact of the Bill on smaller regional universities, incoming National Party Senator Barnaby Joyce, for example, has proposed splitting the VSU Bill in two, with one part outlawing compulsory union dues, with the other allowing fees to be collected for sporting activities.

In essence, all of these proposals seek to ensure that the student organisations, or university-run bodies, can continue to provide basic amenities, such as sporting facilities and cafeterias, while making a “compromise” with the government to silence political dissent. In Victoria and Western Australia, such legislation is already in place after state Labor governments deliberately retained aspects of the bans imposed on student unions by their Liberal Party predecessors during the 1990s.

Under the Victorian Tertiary Education Act, post-secondary education institutions can charge a compulsory “amenities fee” so long as it is used to provide “facilities, services or activities of direct benefit to the institution or students at the institution”. Some university administrations have blocked funding to student newspapers and radio, as well as research, advocacy and representation relating to government or university policy.

In their submissions to the Senate inquiry into the VSU Bill, the National Union of Students (NUS) and the academics’ union, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), have already hinted at their willingness to accept a “compromise” proposal. While formally rejecting the VSU legislation, the NUS submission described the Victorian model as “very different” and the NTEU called it a “welcome difference” to the government’s plans.

The NUS leadership was at pains to emphasise that, despite its public opposition to the government’s policies, behind the scenes it had collaborated closely with the education minister. Its submission recalls Nelson’s praise for the union’s “high level of involvement” in the recent review of higher education (which laid down a blueprint for the spread of private universities and full-fee education) and states “there are areas of agreement between NUS and the current Minister”.

The NUS and NTEU submissions accept the government’s standpoint that tertiary education must be a profitable enterprise. Their argument is that reducing student services will damage the “international student market,” which the NTEU emphasises is “worth

approximately \$6 billion [per year] to Australia”. Far from defending tertiary education, this cringing “opposition” can only encourage the Howard government to go further. Nelson has not only ruled out any compromise on the VSU Bill but recently declared that many more “reforms” lay ahead for universities, which would not make the government popular.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the complete rejection of the VSU legislation and the various “compromises” being floated by the Labor Party, the NUS and others. Students have every right to organise politically, not only against the immediate onslaught on education but in opposition to the war in Iraq, attacks on democratic rights and other issues that will determine the future of the world in which they will live. Along with all young people, they have also the right to access a full range of sporting, cultural and intellectual activities.

Any genuine struggle against the VSU legislation necessarily has to be part of a far broader campaign aimed at reversing the protracted assault on public education at all levels. First-class education is a fundamental democratic right that must be made freely available to all. Fees, both academic and service, should be abolished and students given the financial support necessary to undertake genuinely full-time studies.

The issues facing students cannot be separated from those confronting all working people—the ever-widening imposition of free-market policies at the expense of longstanding conditions and basic rights, a program that has long been embraced and enforced by the Labor Party as much as the Liberals. Students have to find ways to link their struggles with those of ordinary workers, in complete opposition to the trade union bureaucracy that has been instrumental in sabotaging any opposition to the onslaught on living standards.

Such a campaign depends on the elaboration of a different political orientation—one that challenges the foundations of the current social order and the subordination of every aspect of life, including education, to the dictates of the capitalist market. What is required is a complete reordering of society on the basis of social need, not corporate profit—that is, along socialist lines. That is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party.



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