

Rudd's Education Revolution "a disaster for universities"

Our reporters
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The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed Macquarie University's National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) branch president Carolyn Kennett, a supporter of the Socialist Equality Party, about the deepening assault on public tertiary education that sparked yesterday's industrial action.

Last week, at a meeting of NTEU members at Macquarie University, Kennett moved the following motion that was voted down by the branch, with only two in support:

That this branch meeting:

- votes for a one-day stoppage of work on September 16
- calls for a Sydney-wide mass meeting of all university staff on that day to discuss a unified industrial and political campaign against the Rudd government's deepening attacks on jobs and conditions in higher education, its market-driven Bradley Review agenda and its continued financial starvation of universities
- calls for a joint industrial and political campaign with school teachers, parents and students against the Labor government's planned "leagues tables" and other pro-business measures contained in its so-called "Education Revolution"

Kennett said Macquarie University had instructed all departments to cut their budgets by 5 percent; meanwhile the university had this year over-enrolled by 10 percent. "In some first year courses, numbers have doubled. We have to tell students to listen to lectures online. We don't have big enough classrooms to fit them in.

"Academics are angry, mostly about incredibly massive increases in workloads. Nobody warned us

they were going to over-enrol, so none of us were prepared. The beginning of both semesters has been a nightmare trying to rearrange classes and get bigger theatres. There's no more theatre space. But the university says there is space because theatres are available at 8am on a Monday morning or 6pm on a Thursday night.

"Tutorial sizes are off the radar. We now don't build classrooms that hold less than 60 students—and that is called a tutorial. This is a direct result of the funding crisis that universities find themselves in, because we can't afford the staff. In mathematics we have 40 or 50 students. That's not a tutorial, that's a small lecture as far as I'm concerned. We just don't have the money to employ tutors and get students into tutorial class sizes of 20 and furthermore there are not the classrooms. The only under-utilised classrooms are the ones that hold 15 or 20 people because no-one can afford to run class sizes of 15 or 20 students."

Kennett said Rudd's "education revolution" was a disaster for the tertiary sector: "There's been no improvement in the situation. If you have a look at the federal budget—both last year and this year—it's a complete disaster for universities. There's been no improvement in recurrent funding, or minimal improvement but that comes attached to enrolling more students. But it costs us money to teach extra students and we don't have enough money coming in that covers the cost of teaching them. Our funding is stagnating. We didn't even get CPI [Consumer Price Index] increases in our funding, let alone labour price indexing, yet the most significant cost to the university is labour—the cost of staff.

"The new model of funding means that when a student chooses a particular unit or discipline at a particular university, federal government funding will

follow that student. So it's a demand-driven model where students will choose what university they will go to and after they choose the federal government will fund that student. Universities will be allowed to enrol as many students—it's going to be an absolute free-for-all when the whole thing rolls out.

“Most universities will continue to over-enrol because they need the money that will come with these students. Furthermore, because the funding will be attached to the students, one of the really horrible things about it, is that universities will mass-enrol students in the cheap courses that attract a lot of students—disciplines like business and accounting, marketing.

“Disciplines like mathematics, physics, law, the arts and anthropology where we need to be thinking critically about our society—those subjects won't attract huge numbers of students. We've already been told that if we don't manage to attract enough students then our departments are under threat of being shut down.

“And the other consequence is that the private universities are already saying ‘public universities aren't going to be able to cope, so since the money is following the student, why don't you let us in on this as well?’ So we're going to see further privatisation of the sector. Private providers can thrive and make money because they treat their staff appallingly. All their staff members are on short fixed-term contracts.”

Kennett said academics confronted the need for a unified political struggle across the entire education sector against the Rudd Labor government's agenda: “We are constantly being told that this is about individual enterprise bargaining. That's simply not true. The federal government drives the agenda and policies at universities. They are the ones making the decisions about where the sector is going and to fight that we need a political struggle.

“The government does not want an educated population, because an educated population means that people are able to think and look at ways to change things. The government is also being driven by a privatisation agenda. So those two things, hand in hand, give you an “education revolution” with the privatisation of all sectors of education, a deep divide between those who have and those who don't have. And more and more, people who have little in our society will have less access to high quality education.

Those are some of the effects of the education revolution.”



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