

New Zealand university administration calls police on protestors

The Victoria University of Wellington ISSE
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In a blatant attack on democratic rights, two former university students were arrested when they attempted to deliver a petition to the administration of Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) in New Zealand on October 21. The petition, signed by 50 academics, union officials and educationalists, called for the lifting of a two-year trespass order imposed by the university on the pair, Heleyni Pratley and Joel Cosgrove, over a protest against fee increases a month earlier.

Rather than allow the two to present the petition, the university authorities mobilised security personnel to block their entry and called the police, who arrested them. They have been released on bail on condition they neither enter university property nor associate with each other.

The VUW administration had earlier engaged a security company to serve its trespass notices on Pratley and Cosgrove. Pratley claims she was accosted by two security guards who turned up at her home to give them to her. Despite being asked repeatedly to leave, they attempted to physically force their way into the property.

The university's actions underline the thoroughly anti-democratic methods now being used to impose the National Party government's pro-business "user pays" agenda and rationing of tertiary education.

Pratley and Cosgrove were originally banned after a demonstration at a fee-setting meeting of the university council on September 21. About 30 protestors had packed the public gallery of the university's council chambers shouting slogans and chanting against the proposed fee rise. Some, including Cosgrove, hurled eggs and fruit at members of the university council after it decided to close the meeting to the public. Pratley maintains she merely held up a placard throughout the protest. University Vice-Chancellor Pat Walsh condemned the protestors' actions and threatened disciplinary action.

Pratley is a former VUW student welfare vice-president and Cosgrove a former Students' Association (VUWSA) president. Neither are current students at the university, having discontinued their studies earlier this year. They are both members of the petty bourgeois Workers Party (WP), which claimed responsibility for leading the protest. According to the student newspaper, *Salient*, the WP had set out to disrupt the council meeting after the VUWSA's campaign officer, who was also a WP member, resigned his position with the association because he had become frustrated with the association's "less than radical" approach to fee raises and advocacy in general.

VUWSA president Jasmine Freemantle (also a former WP member), who has a seat on the council, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the students' association was not involved in organising the protest apart from "putting up a few posters advertising the meeting and

inviting students to attend it and show opposition to fee increases". The council meeting was a stage-managed provocation against the students. Apparently, Chancellor Tim Beaglehole briefed council members beforehand that in the event of rowdy protests a vote would be taken to move to a different room.

The administration's response to the protest is part of an escalating pattern designed to clamp down on political dissent on campus. In May, Cosgrove and two other members of the WP were suspended after burning the New Zealand flag in a protest against New Zealand's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. The students were banned from sitting their exams and not allowed to re-enrol until the following trimester. In 2007 a trespass order was served against another WP member and former VUWSA president, Nick Kelly, who was involved in protests against fee rises that year, while Cosgrove was served with a one-day exclusion notice at the same time.

VUW, the former Labour government, and student fees

VUW has a history of imposing annual fee increases at the 5 percent maximum allowed by the government, despite persistent student opposition. It is the norm for the university to apply for the biggest possible rise—on one occasion it applied for special exemption to exceed the government's fee maximum. The latest decision provides for a general fee increase of 5 percent plus a doubling of the Student Services Levy from \$251 to \$510. At the same time, courses and programs are facing cuts. In late August staff, students and supporters protested against the university's plan to axe a post-graduate Social Science Research program and make its full-time academic staff redundant. This followed previous moves to cut staff and restructure programmes at the College of Education, the Film School and in the Gender Studies department.

The university has consistently blamed successive government policies for this situation. In an interview with the *Wellingtonian* newspaper on October 22, Vice-Chancellor Walsh noted that tertiary education was one sector where governments found it convenient to exercise "some control" over public expenditure. In the case of VUW, it meant the number of students had been capped at 2006 levels, while funding had remained stagnant at the level of the 1990s. According to Walsh, the impact of the National government's 2009 budget meant the university would continue to lose revenue over the next three years, while there was no commitment to continue annual inflation adjustments beyond 2010.

The prolonged assault on public education began with the Labour government in the 1980s when the tertiary sector was put on a market footing through the imposition of flat-rate fees. Since then, continuous cutbacks in government financing have forced universities to constantly ratchet up fees and to seek sponsorship from big business. Fees rose by an average 13 percent throughout the 1990s, while government funding fell from nearly three-quarters of operating revenue to only 50 percent. Government funding per student continues to decline in real terms.

The impact on students has been ruinous, with working class students particularly disadvantaged. Fees for a typical undergraduate program range between about \$4,000 per annum for a first degree through to \$12,000 a year in medicine. New Zealand's collective student debt under the loans scheme has ballooned to over \$NZ10.2 billion (\$US7.5 billion), sharply escalating under the 1999-2008 Labour government. A Student Income & Expenditure Survey published in 2007 identified significant increases in students' living costs and indebtedness, with average debt rising 54 percent since the previous survey in 2004 to \$28,838 per person. Recent projections show student-loan debt will grow by an annual average of \$875 million, to top more than \$20 billion by 2022.

The onset of the global recession last year sharpened the crisis in tertiary education. With youth unemployment rising, many more young people are seeking entry into higher education, but are barred by government funding caps. Tertiary institutions have been told they will have to fully fund all placements above the agreed enrolment limits. Most have begun to cull programs, tutorials and student numbers. Over 100 academics nationwide have lost their jobs this year. At the same time, students are finding that access to part-time and holiday work, needed to fund their education, is drying up.

The government is now re-examining financial assistance for students. Its draft tertiary education strategy released last month indicated looming restrictions on loans and already meagre student allowances. The Tertiary Education Commission has proposed a system of allocating payments directly to polytechnics and universities, rather than to individuals, and making them conditional on students completing degrees.

The dead-end of protest politics

The measures taken by the VUW administration to silence protests demonstrate how it intends to enforce this agenda. At the same time, the episode exposes the political bankruptcy of the various university student associations and middle class protest outfits. For 20 years, they have postured as opponents of the fees and loans system, while steering students into the dead-end of protest politics.

In a blunt admission to *Salient*, WP spokesman Alastair Reith laid bare the cynicism and political prostration behind the recent VUW protest. He said the fees were going to be raised “regardless of whether we protested or not” and that in the “absence of a mass, radical students’ movement” all the protestors could do was “send a message” that fee rises will not go unopposed, and “that the university bureaucrats can’t just waltz in, attack student’s, [sic] get paid hundreds of dollars and leave. Instead they’re going to be faced with angry students, their meeting is going to be disrupted and ... part of their fee for being there is going to be spent on dry cleaning the egg

out of their suit.”

In fact, neither the Workers Party, nor VUWSA, which the WP has led over the past several years, have mounted any campaign to mobilise the wider student body against fee increases or the recent political victimisations. On the contrary, their predilection for infantile protest stunts has simply provided a pretext for the administration to step up its attack on the democratic rights of all students. The protests and occupations have only demonstrated that the perspective of applying pressure on university administrations and the Labour and National parties has been an utter failure.

As for the student associations—the traditional home of “radical” activists and budding Labour bureaucrats—they have become increasingly moribund. They have largely given up any pretence of opposing fee rises and, like their senior counterparts in the trade unions, have turned themselves over to imposing the government’s agenda.

In her column in *Salient* on September 21, Students Association president Freemantle wrote that while the current fees system “does little to maintain affordable tertiary education”, the New Zealand Union of Students’ Associations believed that it at least “provides certainty for students (and institutions), in that it affords some predictability about the costs involved in study”. Accordingly, VUWSA and the university had recently collaborated in hosting a Student Fees Forum, in order “to communicate to students the issues considered by Council when setting student fees”.

Moreover, far from seeking to defend the protestors and the democratic rights of its members, VUWSA is washing its hands of the entire affair. Freemantle told the WWSWS that she did not view the arrest of the two demonstrators as a matter of concern. She emphasised that the pair were not students and therefore VUWSA had nothing to do with the matter, and denounced the fruit throwing as a “violent” assault. When it was put to her that the university’s actions were an attack on democratic rights and free speech, she disagreed, suggesting that the pair should not have delivered their petition in person if they wanted to avoid trouble. She defended the university’s decision to call the police: “Generally when people are issued with trespass notices, that’s standard practice,” Freemantle declared.

Students should draw the necessary lessons. The politics of protest and pressure have led to a total impasse, demonstrating that neither the ex-radical outfits nor the official student union bodies can or will defend students’ most fundamental rights. The source of the deepening assault on public education is the crisis-ridden profit system itself. To fight for the basic right of all young people to a high class, free public education requires nothing less than the development of an independent political movement of the working class, on the basis of a socialist perspective and program, that aims at the complete reorganisation of society in the interests of the majority, not the wealthy few. This is the perspective of the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE).



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