

Australia: The political issues in the University of NSW work bans dispute

Statement International Students for Social Equality (ISSE)
19 July 2010

The following statement is to be distributed at a July 20 student meeting called by the Student Representatives Council at the University of New South Wales, a university with more than 44,000 domestic and international students in Sydney.

The work bans commenced by academic and administration staff at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) on June 30, and the university's provocative decision to stand down over 70 staff without pay in retaliation, raise crucial political questions.

The ISSE expresses its support for the stand taken by UNSW staff, and demands that all be reinstated immediately and paid in full for the period they have been stood down.

UNSW staff and students must understand, however, that they are involved, not just in an industrial struggle against the university's administration but a political struggle against the Gillard government. They directly confront the combined impact of two of the new prime minister's key policies—the draconian provisions of the “Fair Work Act” and the so-called “education revolution.”

Both these policies were personally overseen by Julia Gillard—in her former role as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations—before she was installed as prime minister in the backroom coup of June 24 that ousted Kevin Rudd.

In announcing a snap federal election for August 21, Gillard declared that central to her agenda is her pro-market blueprint for subordinating all aspects of education, to the needs of the “economy”—that is, of the employers.

National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members on the UNSW campus voted last week to maintain a ban on the processing of students' final examination marks from first semester until at least July 20. The university cannot charge students fees for second semester until these results have been processed.

The work ban is part of an NTEU campaign for a new enterprise agreement at UNSW. The main point of contention between the

union and UNSW management is the prevalence of fixed-term employment contracts. Vice-Chancellor Fred Hilmer is adamant that the university must retain full discretion to determine levels of casual, part-time and permanent staff—leaving academics and administrative staff in a precarious financial position.

The UNSW administration is only able to stand down staff because of the repressive powers granted to employers by the Rudd/Gillard Labor government. Under its “Fair Work” laws, it is illegal for workers to engage in industrial action—such as strikes and work bans—except in extremely limited circumstances, during enterprise bargaining periods. As the UNSW dispute demonstrates, even when workers do take legally protected actions, employers are legally entitled to stand them down, or lock them out completely.

Far from removing the Howard government's hated “Work Choices” regime, the Labor government has expanded its key provisions.

The UNSW staff action—and the management's retaliatory measures—have evoked a significant student response. Many have joined support groups on the social networking site, Facebook. The group, “UNSW Law Students Support Our Lecturers,” currently stands at over 700. “UNSW Arts and Social Science Faculty Students Support Their Lecturers” has over 600 members.

Like their lecturers, students—and young people more generally—are increasingly forced to take low-paid, casual or part-time work, with little or no job security, in order to survive. A Law Students' open letter to the vice-chancellor says of the UNSW staff: “We understand their concerns about job security, rates of pay, paid parental leave and Indigenous employment targets. We appreciate that their decision to withhold marks cannot have been taken lightly and we believe they have taken into consideration our interests and the quality of our legal education.”

While these sentiments are entirely principled, it is clear that students are not yet aware of the economic, social and political forces they are up against.

Beginning with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments from 1983 to 1996, universities have been increasingly starved of public

funding. In its place, domestic and international students have been forced to pay increasingly exorbitant fees. Domestic students leave university with HECS/HELP debts worth tens of thousands of dollars, while billions are extracted from international students through fees each year, making the international student “market” Australia’s third-highest export earner.

With a high percentage of international students, UNSW is particularly exposed to the fluctuations of this market. In an internet video released via UNSWTV, Vice-Chancellor Hilmer displayed a graph of UNSW revenue from 2007 to 2009. “Volatile revenue sources”, such as fees from international students, increased from 43 percent to 48 percent of funding, while “stable revenue sources,” including HECS fees from domestic students, decreased from 57 percent to 52 percent of university funding. Under these conditions, Hilmer declared, the university cannot offer “continuing positions for everybody”.

In other words, the inevitable consequence of subordinating universities to the dictates of the global capitalist market is ongoing financial volatility, and consequent destruction of job security. This will only worsen under the demand-driven funding arrangements proposed by Prime Minister Gillard. UNSW and other universities are set to have the proportion of total revenue drawn from “volatile” sources dramatically increased.

In what is effectively a voucher system, from 2012 universities will be paid according to the number of students they attract to their courses. Universities will have to compete with each other for funds by enrolling as many students as possible in the most lucrative courses. These will be increasingly tailored to meet the narrow vocational requirements of employers, which can change abruptly.

Lecture and class sizes will inevitably grow, with increasingly worse staff-to-student ratios. In preparation for the new regime, UNSW has “over-enrolled” by 17 percent this year—in other words, it has grabbed market share by enrolling more students than it is funded for.

Increasingly, it will become unviable for universities to retain staff on anything other than a casual or short-term basis. Longer-term employment contracts would prevent them from responding immediately to business demands.

The UNSW stand-downs are not simply a product of Vice-Chancellor Hilmer’s particular management style, however repugnant that may be. He is simply implementing the Labor government’s agenda.

The NTEU, however, is seeking at all costs to prevent staff and students from developing a political struggle against the government, even though a similar dispute, also involving a stand-down of staff, is underway at Victoria University in Melbourne.

This is because the NTEU fully supports Labor’s free market

restructuring of tertiary education, which NTEU president Carolyn Allport has called a “critical part of the nation building agenda”. Furthermore, the NTEU and other unions have all voted for Labor’s “Fair Work” industrial laws at Australian Council of Trade Union (ACTU) congresses.

On each campus, the NTEU works to impose the government’s policies by reaching separate agreements with university management. Earlier this year, for example, the NTEU negotiated a deal at the University of Western Sydney that allows for 15 varieties of fixed-term contracts, some as short as six months.

The ISSE unequivocally opposes Gillard’s pro-business agenda. Universities must be fully funded public institutions, freely available to all and run in the interests of the full intellectual and cultural development of students and staff. Such a perspective is only possible on the basis of a socialist economy, whose guiding principle is the satisfaction of human need, rather than the demands of the corporate and financial elite.

The NTEU, and its pseudo “left” apologists in groups such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance—along with the Greens—work to block any such political movement directed against the Labor government. Despite Gillard’s market-driven policies, they all continue to insist that Labor is a “lesser evil” than the Liberals.

The ISSE calls for students and staff to organise city-wide meetings across all university campuses—independent of the NTEU—to discuss and develop a unified industrial and political campaign against the Labor government’s agenda.



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