

New Zealand universities cut staff and courses

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8 September 2011

Universities across New Zealand are carrying out drastic restructuring, cutting hundreds of jobs and eliminating courses. Jobs are being axed at the University of Canterbury and Victoria University of Wellington. At Auckland University, Wellington Institute of Technology and Christchurch Polytechnic, staff have taken part in protests and strikes against proposals to significantly increase workloads.

These cutbacks are a result of the National Party government's austerity measures over the past three years, and are a part of the global assault on workers and youth in response to the international economic crisis. The government's 2011 budget increased funding for universities by less than half the inflation rate. Universities have increased fees and levies, restricted entry criteria and turned away thousands of students, as well as eliminated programs and sacked staff.

The University of Canterbury (UC), in the earthquake-devastated city of Christchurch, is preparing the most severe cuts. On September 1, the Tertiary Education Union revealed that an internal UC document proposed to eliminate 351 academic and non-academic positions, about 18 percent of the university's staff, over three years. This follows around 100 layoffs last year. Student numbers at UC have dropped by 13 percent since the earthquakes began. The number of international students, who are forced to pay higher fees and are a major source of revenue, has fallen by 21 percent.

Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) announced in July that it would sack seven academic staff in four different departments due to "financial constraints." Last year the university turned away hundreds of would-be students and also closed its gender studies program. The Criminal Justice Research Centre is now to be dismantled and its three researchers made redundant because it is not "profitable" enough. Four other lecturers—in political science, education

and philosophy—will also lose their jobs. On August 4, 200 students and staff protested against the redundancies and the shutting down of courses.

Hundreds of staff at Auckland University have over the past six months been involved in limited union-organised industrial action, including various bans, against proposed changes to their collective agreement. Management is demanding direct control over research and study leave, criteria for promotion and appointments, and disciplinary guidelines. The Tertiary Education Union (TEU) has appealed for the government's Employment Relations Authority to intervene to settle the dispute. Students are also angry about a decision to eliminate a popular "Business in Society" course.

At Christchurch Polytechnic, more than 200 teaching staff held three strikes last month. Union members have voted overwhelmingly to reject a 4 percent pay offer, demanding 5 percent. They have not received a raise since 2009. Staff also oppose a move to increase their hours of work and slash leave to make up for time lost following the earthquakes. A TEU statement on September 1 said the union was trying to reach a "compromise" with management.

On August 29, Wellington Institute of Technology (Weltec) staff walked off the job over proposals to increase hours, remove discretionary leave for new employees, and allow management to force staff to work late on weekends. The TEU has collaborated with CEO Linda Sissons—the former head of the Trade Union Education Authority—to undermine conditions. In March, after an eight-month dispute, the TEU claimed a "victory" after delivering a new agreement involving a 1.5 percent annualised pay increase—less than half the inflation rate. The main concern of teachers, however, had been demands for significant changes in working hours. The union and Weltec management convinced the teachers that a working party would investigate "enhanced productivity."

All of these disputes have been kept isolated by the TEU

despite the common thrust of the attacks—to cut jobs, reduce real wages and drive up productivity. In a comment in the *Otago Times Daily*, TEU spokesman Stephen Day claimed that management was engaged in a “micromanaging craze” of staff. Over the past three years, he declared, “our members have been relatively unconcerned about money and mindful of doing their bit in the global financial crisis”. In reality, it has been the union that has collaborated with management to “do its bit” to overcome the resistance of its members to cost cutting.

Last year the TEU worked with Canterbury University through a “consultation” process to impose almost 100 redundancies. In March 2010, TEU branch president Megan Clayton told the *Press* that she was “reasonably happy” with the way the cuts were being made. At VUW, the union has collaborated in downsizing the College of Education since 2008, helping to cut dozens of jobs through so-called “voluntary” redundancies.

The TEU, acting in concert with the student associations, is using the current round of cuts to demand closer “consultation” with management. At a meeting of VUW staff and students on August 18, TEU officials carried several resolutions condemning management “processes”, without demanding the university withdraw the sackings and a halt to course closures. TEU organiser Michael Gilchrist told the meeting: “If there’s cuts in income, sometimes you’ve got to cut staff.”

The National government is also slashing costs by restricting access to university education. Last month, the Qualifications Authority raised the minimum academic requirements for university entrance. According to the New Zealand Union of Students Associations, if the new rules had applied to this year’s intake, 8 percent of first-year students would have been turned away. The government has also launched a marketing campaign aimed at doubling the number of international students as a means of boosting universities’ revenue.

The attacks on education and other social services will be intensified after the November election. In May, Finance Minister Bill English said cuts would continue for “the next four or five years.” The Labour Party opposition and the Greens have both agreed that spending cuts are needed to reduce public debt.

Students in Auckland and Wellington will participate in a “National Day of Action” on September 14 to oppose the government’s policies. However, the organisers—who

include members from the pseudo-left Workers Party and Socialist Aotearoa—are planning a protest stunt, limiting their demand to the call for the resignation of vice-chancellors. As has happened over the past two decades of sustained attack on tertiary education, the student leaders are deliberately blocking a political struggle against the government.

The role of the ex-lefts was sharply revealed at a planning meeting of the “We are the University” group last week at VUW, at which members of the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) intervened.

The ISSE noted that the cuts at universities were part of a government-directed austerity program to make the working class pay for the failure of the capitalism. A similar assault was being carried out in every country. ISSE members argued that the only realistic way to fight the assault on education was to reject the government’s agenda and seek to mobilise the working class against it on the basis of a socialist program. This was denounced by Workers Party members, who insisted that questions of socialism and capitalism were “beyond the scope of the meeting.” With the help of TEU officials, they proposed a series of infantile protests to “embarrass” VUW management. There was virtually no discussion about the government’s policies, let alone how to oppose them.

In opposition to this bankrupt perspective, the ISSE calls for the broadest possible mobilisation of students and workers against the government-led attacks on education and all other social services. Students and young people—who face record levels of unemployment and poverty—must demand free, high quality, accessible education, and decent living standards for all. In order to carry out this struggle, academics and students need to break from the unions and promoters of protest politics and turn to the building of an independent political movement of the working class to fight for a workers’ government and socialist policies.



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