

New Zealand: Students protest against university cuts

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Students across New Zealand have taken part in protests over recent weeks against cuts to university staff and courses. Hundreds rallied at Auckland University and Victoria University of Wellington (VUW), and smaller demonstrations were held at Otago University, and the University of Waikato.

About 200 students protested at VUW on September 14 against the university's decision to sack seven academic staff and close the Criminal Justice Research Centre because it is not "profitable." This month VUW announced plans to end the Certificate of University Preparation "bridging" course, after the government cut funding for it. On October 13, 30 students occupied VUW's Overbridge to protest the cuts.

On October 17, 100 students occupied the Auckland University Council boardroom to protest against a four percent fee hike. They issued a statement calling for free education. This followed an earlier protest on September 26, in which 250 students occupied the Auckland University business school to oppose fee increases. Students also oppose the university's plan to restrict staff research and study leave and remove criteria for promotion from their collective agreement.

VUW and Auckland University management responded to the protests by deploying security guards and calling police. Demonstrators at VUW reported being roughly pushed by security guards as they attempted to deliver a letter to Vice-Chancellor Pat Walsh. Students ended their five-hour occupation in Auckland last month after police threatened to storm the building. One protester was arrested and charged with breaking a trespass order that had been imposed for a previous protest at the university.

Other institutions are also making major cuts. The University of Canterbury, in the earthquake-devastated city of Christchurch, is planning to sack as many as 350 staff next year, due to a drop in enrolments and a government funding freeze. Massey University has announced a proposal to cut teacher training courses. Staff members at Wellington and Christchurch polytechnics have held strikes against proposals to significantly increase workloads.

Universities across the country have raised fees and levies, eliminated programs, sacked staff, restricted entry criteria and turned away thousands of students. The education cutbacks are a result of the National Party government's austerity measures, which form part of the international assault on workers' living standards that is being waged in response to the economic crisis.

The government has responded to the student protests with undisguised contempt and hostility. Tertiary Education Minister Steven Joyce told the *New Zealand Herald* that students were "reasonably well looked after" and should "keep [their] heads down." In fact, students face widespread poverty and unemployment. Almost one in five 15 to 24 year-olds is officially unemployed, and thousands of students are forced to rely on student loans and their families to survive financially.

According to an OECD report released last month, New Zealand university tuition fees rank seventh highest of 34 member countries. Public funding has been progressively reduced over the past 20 years by successive Labor and National led governments.

Onerous tuition fees, which are ratcheted up each year, leave graduates saddled with a mountain of debt. At the end of 2010, 894,000 people had borrowed a total of \$13.9 billion from the loans scheme.

The Tertiary Education Union (TEU), which represents staff, is collaborating with university administrations to impose redundancies and attack working conditions. Last year the TEU worked with Canterbury University through a “consultation” process to slash almost 100 jobs. 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 has not demanded that VUW withdraw its most recent sackings, and has limited itself to criticising the lack of consultation.

The protests at VUW and Auckland University were organised independently of the student unions by recently formed groups called “We are the University”, in which the pseudo-left Workers Party and Socialist Aotearoa are playing leading roles. These organisations promote illusions in the TEU, and divert students from taking up a political struggle against the government and the capitalist system. The protests have been characterised by a total absence of political demands and perspective.

None of the ex-radical groups has called for a fight to defend the hundreds of jobs under threat at the University of Canterbury, where the TEU is again helping to impose redundancies. National President Sandra Grey told the *Press* on October 4: “There was no doubt in anyone’s mind that there was going to be some job cuts. While they’re disappointed, they are realistic.” The UC Students Association has also accepted the job cuts as a fait accompli. President Kohan McNab gave an empty assurance that the UCSA would “ensure that cuts do not negatively impact on the academic experience of students.”

At the Auckland protest on September 26, Joe Carolan, an organiser for the Unite union and Socialist Aotearoa, called for students and workers to “bring down” the National government, while saying nothing about the Labour Party and the Greens. This was not an

oversight, but an attempt to promote illusions that the return of a Labour government at the election next month would represent a step forward. In fact, all the establishment parties agree with “user pays” education. Labour first introduced fees in tertiary education in 1990. During its period in office from 1999 to 2008—when it was supported by the Greens and the so-called “left” Alliance—fees continued to rise at around five percent per year.

Over the past two decades, students have repeatedly sought to oppose the imposition of fees and the undermining of public tertiary education. The trade unions and various ex-radical groups have consistently contained opposition by channelling youth into futile protest stunts aimed at pressuring the government of the day or university administrations.

Students can only oppose the unending attacks on education and living standards by turning to the working class and a socialist and internationalist program directed against the profit system itself. This is the perspective of the International Students for Social Equality, the student movement of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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