

Australian government imposes new student union fee

Zac Hambides
12 November 2011

The Australian Labor government passed a bill last month to allow universities to charge all students an annual fee of up to \$263 for basic student services, but expressly excluded any funding for political activities. As well as imposing an additional financial burden on students, the legislation reflects concerns in ruling circles about a developing political radicalisation among young people.

Student services had for decades been managed by student unions that received their funding from compulsory student union dues paid by all students on enrollment. However, since the rollout of Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) by the previous Liberal-National Coalition government in 2007, services have either collapsed as many students elected not to pay the union fees or were taken over by university administrations.

The compulsory fee is slated to fund “a range of campus services, including sporting and recreational activities, employment and career advice, child care, financial advice and food services,” according to Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans. But the bill specifically forbids the use of the funds for any political discussion or activity on campus.

Australian students will have the “option” of adding the fee to their Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), the student debt repayment scheme in Australia, if they are already on it. If not, they must pay the fee upfront.

The funds will be controlled by student unions, a measure that the Greens in particular have campaigned for since the bill was first introduced into parliament in September last year. “Universities will be required to consult with students on the specific uses of the proceeds from any services and amenities fees,” Evans said when announcing the legislation.

The National Union of Students (NUS) fully supports the legislation as a means of strengthening its apparatus and readily agreed to the ban on political activity. NUS President Jesse Marshal told the *Conversation* website last month: “We understand the concerns government and the community had in wanting this fee to be spent in an appropriate way. We are happy for student organisations to work with universities to determine the best way to do that.”

The fee will add to the already enormous burden of HECS debt for graduates, which currently totals \$15 billion. For those not on HECS, the fee will add to the high start-of-year costs including full upfront fees, which for international students is two to five times that of Australian students.

University administrations have welcomed the bill as it eases the cost of funding services to them. Macquarie University in Sydney, for instance, spent on average \$20 million annually on student services since the liquidation of the university’s student union in 2007. The fee is expected to cover about one third of those costs next year. As with HECS, once introduced, these fees can be continually increased.

This measure transfers the cost of providing services directly onto students themselves. The legislation is entirely in line with the pro-market agenda of the Gillard government and constitutes a further step in applying the user-pays principle to universities that is increasingly limiting access to the wealthy.

Various organisations have praised the government for reversing the Howard government’s VSU. Universities Australia CEO Glen Withers told the *Conversation* website: “It will reinvigorate student life and enable universities to once again provide the fundamental services that help students to navigate university, achieve success in their studies, and

participate in sport and the university community.”

In fact, the legislation is designed to reinvigorate, not student life, but the student unions that either atrophied or became defunct under the VSU. The Labor Party and the Greens opposed voluntary unionism because the student union apparatuses were a useful recruiting and training ground for party careerists and activists.

More fundamentally, however, the Howard government VSU was directed against political activity among students and young people more generally. Its introduction in 2005 took place in the aftermath of the huge protests against the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. While justified on the pretext of giving students a choice, the main concern was spelled out by a Senate committee which declared: “Under a compulsory fee regime it is almost impossible to prevent student funds being used for political activities without student approval.”

The Labor Party formally opposed VSU legislation in 2005 but made clear its agreement with the suppression of political discussion. Jenny Macklin, the then shadow minister for education, called on the government to accept a “compromise” in which union dues would continue to be compulsory for a range of services that excluded political activity.

During the 2007 election campaign, Labor reversed its stance and announced its support for keeping the measure intact. Far from opposing the shift, the NUS argued that students had no choice but to pressure the Labor Party. Adapting to Labor’s shift, NUS president Michael Nguyen declared: “The reality is that if we don’t work with the ALP, we aren’t going to get any solution to VSU.”

The “solution to VSU” is the current legislation drawn up and introduced following the ousting of Kevin Rudd and installation of Julia Gillard as prime minister.

The Labor government’s re-imposition of compulsory student fees, particularly at the urging of the Greens, is in the first instance aimed at reestablishing their recruiting ground in the student union apparatuses. More fundamentally, however, it reflects fears in ruling circles of a growing radicalisation of young people that finds its expression in the eruption of the Occupy movement internationally.

The decision to revive the student union apparatuses

is aimed at trying to establish a mechanism for policing political activity on campuses and preventing any movement from entering dangerous political channels. In the past, the student unions played a key political role in dissipating the anger and opposition to the reintroduction and extension of student fees in the 1980s and 1990s.

Over the past decade, NUS has sought to channel widespread discontent among students back behind the Labor Party and the Greens. This was precisely the role it on every major issue over the past decade from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to the introduction of VSU in 2005-07. Student unions are now being bolstered to perform a similar function as students and youth are radicalised amid the greatest crisis of capitalism since the Great Depression.

The International Students for Social Equality opposes the Gillard government’s legislation which is another financial burden on students and an attempt to stifle political discussion on campuses. Young people have the social right to high quality education completely free of charge. Student services and a living wage should be provided to students automatically. Students should be provided with facilities and finance to form political clubs and engage in political activities as well as for the full range of sporting, cultural and intellectual pursuits.

Such a perspective is realisable only as part of the broader struggle of the working class to transform society on a socialist basis to meet the needs of the vast majority of working people and youth, not the profits of the wealthy few.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact