

Australia: TAFE teachers and students protest Victorian budget cuts

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15 May 2012

A rally of about 3,000 teachers and students from metropolitan and country TAFE (Technical and Further Education) colleges was held in Melbourne on May 10 against severe education spending cuts recently imposed by the Liberal government in Victoria.

The state budget delivered earlier this month included \$300 million in TAFE funding cuts. As a result, up to 1,500 job losses are anticipated. Specific institutes have already detailed the measures they will be compelled to implement, including Homes Glen TAFE, a \$28 million cut; Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE, a \$23 million cutback; RMIT University, a \$20 million funding reduction in its TAFE operations; and Victoria University, a \$29 million cut to its TAFE courses.

Entire courses will soon be eliminated, and some students will face a quadrupling of their course fees, from \$2,000 to \$8,000, making vocational education and training unaffordable for many working class youth. Supplementary funding covering the provision of libraries, student counselling services, and learning support and community learning centres will be eliminated. TAFEs have also warned that they will have to drop services such as child-care.

The Victorian budget cuts form part of the pro-business austerity agenda now being coordinated by state and federal governments.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard has spearheaded the accelerating privatisation of technical and further education. Her federal Labor government's "National Partnership Agreement for Skills Reform" and "Skills for Australia" programs aim to provide greater opportunities for private and for-profit training and education institutions.

In Victoria, the previous Labor government of Premier John Brumby also worked to undermine the public TAFE system. According to the Australian

Education Union, Brumby's "reforms" saw TAFE's share of enrolled technical students plummet from 75 percent in 2007 to 48 percent in 2011, with private providers increasing their share from 14 percent to 40 percent.

The latest measures will further accelerate this shift. The budget cuts involve the government slashing funding for TAFE students in up to 80 percent of current courses. Funding is allocated on a per student, per hour basis; some degrees and certificates will be cut from \$10.36 an hour to just \$1.50. The targeted subjects include hospitality, sport and recreation, and business courses—courses that are widely offered by private operators.

Many TAFE trades courses that require more expensive infrastructure and training and have fewer privately offered alternatives—such as automotive training, building and construction and engineering—have been exempted from the hourly funding cut. This reflects the demands of manufacturing companies for a skilled and readily exploitable workforce.

The trade unions are playing the key role in facilitating the state and federal cuts, despite their posturing as opponents of the current budget cutbacks.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) and National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) organised the Thursday rally. The central orientation was to cover up the role of the Gillard government in the regressive TAFE measures and to promote the Labor Party's efforts to return to office in Victoria at the next state election in 2014.

AEU Victorian president Mary Bluett demagogically denounced the Liberal government as "heartless" and "mean spirited." She declared, "We will take this campaign right up to the next state election." NTEU

Victorian secretary Colin Long declared that a two-year campaign before the next election would “change the government.”

As its record demonstrates, a new state Labor government would pick up where the Liberals left off and deepen the assault on public education, including on TAFE colleges.

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Peter McFadyen, a teacher at Gippsland TAFE, travelled in a contingent from Yallourn North, about 100 kilometres from Melbourne in the former industrial heartland of the Latrobe Valley. He told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “Obviously at Gippsland TAFE all the areas that had money cut from their budget will suffer, especially business studies and hospitality. There will be job losses for teachers, and the students will suffer. In ten years time there will be a shortage of skilled workers. There has been a huge expansion of private providers in our sector. They don’t have to have the infrastructure we have to have, such as libraries and workshops.

“It’s true Labor is making budget cuts in Canberra. It is a tag team—Liberal and Labor. Areas like education and healthcare should be untouchable, they should have guaranteed funding.”

“There are many good TAFE teachers in our area. The Sword of Damocles is hanging over their heads, not knowing what is going to happen... There is already far too much casualisation of teaching. Teaching is a vocation, not just a job. I’m not denigrating those teachers, there are many excellent casual teachers, but look at the long term future... [state Premier] Ted Baillieu is not going to be moved by protests. And the previous [Labor] government set this up. We knew it would happen.”



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