

New Zealand police attack protest against education budget cuts

Tom Peters
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Police arrested 43 people last Friday in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, during a violent crackdown on a protest against the conservative National Party government's latest round of cuts to tertiary education. The "Blockade the Budget" protest was organised by the University of Auckland student protest group, "We Are the University." About 400 students and supporters marched through the city centre to oppose the government's attacks, which include cuts to student allowances and an increase to the student loan repayment rate. The protest followed budget day rallies on May 24 in Auckland and Wellington.

About 100 police surrounded the rally on Symonds Street and violently dragged several protesters to waiting paddy wagons. Auckland University student Jai Bentley-Payne, a leader of "We Are the University", told *Auckland Now* that protesters were grabbed "by their arms, throats and clothes" and that he had suffered a bruised neck. Another protester received a cut to the forehead when police pushed him against the ground. Bentley-Payne was held in custody for six hours and charged with "obstructing police." Three others were charged with "disturbing the peace" and 39 were released without charge.

Videos posted on YouTube, including this one, show that the police violence was completely unprovoked.

The arrests were a deliberate attempt to intimidate the growing opposition to the government's austerity budget. Since 2008, the government has slashed spending on basic services such as health, welfare and education forcing the working class to pay for the impact of the worsening global economic crisis. As well as attacking university education, the latest budget, which Finance Minister Bill English described as the "tightest" in the last 20 years, includes plans to sack hundreds of primary and secondary teachers and to

further restrict access to aged care.

Speaking to a business audience on May 25, English responded to the budget day protests with contempt, saying students should "count themselves lucky that they've still got interest free loans." Tertiary Education Minister Steven Joyce told TVNZ on June 5 that New Zealand had "one of the most generous student support schemes in the world."

In fact, New Zealand's tuition fees are the seventh highest out of the 34 countries in the OECD. Fees average more than \$NZ3,600 (\$US2,720) per year and most people can only study by taking on huge debts. Students and graduates collectively owe more than \$12 billion. The Graduate Longitudinal Study NZ, commissioned by universities in 2011 and released in April, shows that a quarter of tertiary students are living in poverty. One in six does not have enough money for basic accommodation, clothing and food. Part-time work for students has dried up, with unemployment for people aged under 24 now close to 20 percent.

The latest measures will drive even more students and graduates into financial distress. More than 500,000 people will be forced to pay back their student loans more quickly, with the mandatory repayment rate rising from 10 to 12 percent of any earnings over the poverty wage of \$19,080 a year. The government will also push an estimated 5,000 people off student allowances by tightening eligibility criteria.

The pitifully low allowances, which are generally below \$200 per week and only available to some students from low-income families, will not be paid for more than four years of study or for postgraduate study. The parental income threshold to qualify for an allowance will be frozen for the next four years at its current level of just \$55,000. These moves will put

higher education even further out of reach for working class students.

The “We Are the University” (WATU) groups in Auckland and Wellington, which are dominated by the pseudo-left Socialist Aotearoa (SA) and the Workers Party, promote the illusion that trade union action will pressure the government to back down. A statement on SA’s blog on June 1 appealed to the Tertiary Education Union (TEU) and other unions to help “spread the struggle from the UoA to all of the university campuses, the schools and the trade unions, go for broke and look to shut down the city with blockades and occupations until the Nats give in.”

The reality is that the TEU and the unions as a whole are actively collaborating with the government’s austerity measures. The TEU is currently helping to enforce job cuts and course closures at the University of Canterbury, in the earthquake-devastated city of Christchurch. At Victoria University of Wellington, the union has assisted the downsizing of the College of Education since 2008, helping to impose dozens of so-called “voluntary” redundancies. Last year the TEU accepted the closure of VUW’s Criminal Justice Research Centre and the sacking of seven academic staff, only criticising the lack of consultation.

The students’ associations, for their part, have impotently called for the government to increase education funding—even as it does the very opposite—while encouraging students to put their faith in the opposition Labour Party or Maori nationalist Mana Party. New Zealand Union of Students’ Associations President Pete Hodkison told TVNZ on June 5 that the cuts could be stopped either by a “change of attitude in government” or by a “change of government” at the 2014 election.

The promotion of Labour and Mana as a progressive alternative is utterly fraudulent. It was the Labour government of David Lange that introduced the first flat-rate tertiary fees during the 1980s. The Labour government of Helen Clark from 1999 to 2008—supported by the “left wing” Alliance and the Greens—steadily increased fees, and total student debt ballooned from \$3 billion in 2000 to more than \$10 billion in 2008. If returned to power, it will impose austerity on the demands of the financial markets no less than the Nationals. Mana leader Hone Harawira, who has been lauded by all the pseudo-left groups, has

repeatedly indicated his willingness to enter into a parliamentary bloc with Labour.

The political bankruptcy of the student associations and pseudo-left groups was on display at a May 24 rally at Victoria University of Wellington. The only proposal advanced by representatives from the VUW Students’ Association and WATU was for students to migrate to Australia if education cuts continued. Not only is this no solution for individuals—tertiary education is just as much under attack in Australia—but it directly cuts across the fight to develop a unified struggle of the working class against the entire austerity agenda of the government and the corporate interests it serves.

The International Students for Social Equality calls for a decisive break from Labour and all its apologists. New organisations must be built, politically independent of the trade unions and student associations, to fight for free, high quality education in universities, polytechs and schools. This struggle must link up with the struggle of workers against job and wage cutting and against the cuts to other fundamental social rights such as health and aged care. The development of an independent political movement of the working class requires the building of a Socialist Equality Party in New Zealand and a conscious fight for a workers’ government on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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