

Australia: Teachers face political struggle to fight Victorian TAFE cuts

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Thousands of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers and students in Victoria are expected to rally at state parliament this Thursday against the \$300 million-a-year cuts being imposed by the Liberal state government of Ted Baillieu.

The cuts will ensure the destruction of courses, jobs and studies across the state. Already 550 jobs have been eliminated and another 1,450 will be axed by the end of the year. Eighty percent of courses will be adversely affected.

Some students face a quadrupling of their course fees, from \$2,000 to \$8,000, making them unaffordable for many working-class youth. Funding for libraries, student counselling services, learning support and community learning centres is being eliminated, and child care services will have to be dropped.

It is increasingly clear, however, that the Labor Party and the trade unions are intent on diverting the anger over these devastating cuts into the dead end of a campaign for the return of a Labor state government—in two years' time—that will only deepen the assault on TAFE and public education as a whole.

During last month's Melbourne by-election campaign, the electorate was saturated with billboards and leaflets falsely claiming that a vote for Labor would "Save TAFE." Illusions were also created that voting Labor would force the Baillieu government to relent. Petitions were circulated to "tell the Baillieu government the cuts to TAFE are just not right." Largely on this basis, Labor was able, just barely, to retain the seat.

Likewise, the Australian Education Union (AEU), which covers TAFE and other public education teachers, presents the cuts as solely the product of the Liberals. At the last protest rally in May, AEU Victorian president Mary Bluett denounced the Baillieu

government as "heartless" and declared: "We will take this campaign right up to the next state election."

The AEU and other unions are deliberately covering up the record of the previous state Labor government, and the real driving force of the cuts—the restructuring agenda of the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

Not only is the Gillard government slashing its own spending, in order to satisfy the demands of the financial markets to eliminate the budget deficit, it is insisting that the states must impose matching austerity programs, even as their revenues are declining due to the worsening slump throughout most of the economy.

The Labor government's May budget pledged ongoing surpluses and thus deep inroads into public spending for years to come. It set the benchmark for the state governments, which are directly responsible for providing essential services such as education and health.

At the centre of the attack on TAFE is the Gillard government's entire Vocational and Further Education (VET) program. It is designed to further undermine the public TAFE system nationally by creating a "contestable market" in which private operators can invest in the most lucrative courses. Over the past three years, Labor has imposed a virtual student voucher system, allocating funds on the condition that the states provide an "entitlement-based student demand-driven training system."

These measures dovetail with Labor's so-called "Skills for Australia" programs, which enable major corporations to ensure that courses meet their narrow training and commercial requirements, at the expense of the broader educational needs of young people and mature-age students.

Far from opposing this agenda, the previous Victorian

Labor government of John Brumby spearheaded it. In 2008, the Brumby government put all vocational courses up for tender. The “contestable” model of funding set Victoria’s 14 TAFE institutes and four dual sector universities with TAFE components against each other and opened the sector up to privatisation.

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. By 2011, there were 721 government-subsidised private providers. Victoria blazed the trail for the restructuring of TAFE nationally.

This assault continued right up to Labor losing office in Victoria at the end of 2010, amid widespread public hostility to its far-reaching assault on jobs, working conditions and essential services. Outgoing skills minister Bronwyn Pike announced that from January 2011 there would be a “fully contestable training market, where allocation of government funds is driven not by agency or institutional budgets, but by demand from students.”

The incoming Baillieu government simply took over Labor’s “reforms” to deepen the attack on TAFE, inflicting cuts that cost 300 jobs in 2011. This year, this process has been speeded up, with the loss of thousands of jobs.

Labor’s pro-market restructuring of vocational and further education is integral to its wider agenda to refashion the Australian economy to meet the demands of the corporate elite and match the onslaught on jobs, wages and social services being inflicted on the working class across Europe and America.

The trade unions, including the AEU, have been the facilitators and enforcers of this program, isolating and suppressing all resistance to mass retrenchments and closures that are decimating basic industries such as motor vehicles and parts, steel and retail.

There is widespread public support for TAFE, especially in working-class, regional and rural centres, where TAFE colleges are a vital part of local communities. But teachers and students must face the reality: if the campaign against the TAFE cuts remains shackled to the unions and the Labor Party, it will be isolated and sabotaged.

The AEU has consistently refused to unite the struggles of TAFE and school teachers, who are

currently in dispute with the Baillieu government, let alone with those of all the other workers in struggle against job losses and restructuring.

TAFE teachers and students need to break with the union bureaucrats and Labor apparatus, unite with school teachers and turn to wider sections of workers and youth for support. What is needed is a political movement of the working class against the state and federal governments. Rank-and-file committees should be formed in TAFE colleges, other workplaces and communities to reach out to other workers under attack nationally and internationally.

High-quality education, including for adult workers, is a basic right and necessity in modern society and must be guaranteed to all, free of charge. The only way of ensuring that is through the fight for a workers’ government based on socialist policies to refashion society to meet the pressing social needs of the majority, not the profits of the wealthy few. These are the policies fought for by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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