

Australia: TAFE teachers strike over job losses, assets sell off

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Technical and Further Education (TAFE) staff in the state of Victoria staged a 24-hour strike yesterday to protest the severe education spending cuts imposed by the state Liberal government of Premier Ted Baillieu. The industrial action, not authorised under the federal Labor government's Fair Work industrial laws, was triggered by new details of the impact of the \$300 million spending cut announced in the state budget last May.

The *Age* last week revealed the contents of a leaked 86-page cabinet-in-confidence document prepared for the Baillieu government, which detailed the "transition plans" in every TAFE college for the funding reduction. The document made clear that there will be steep fee increases, as many as 2,000 job losses, and a sweeping sell-off of public TAFE property assets and courses offered to students.

Among the colleges that face being sold are Bendigo's Castlemaine campus, Yallourn College in Gippsland, Kangan Institute in Moreland and the Ararat campus. Swinburne University also wants the government to either purchase or allow the private sale of its Lilydale and Prahran TAFE campuses. The university estimates its Prahran campus would fetch \$50 million while Lilydale would raise \$27.5 million.

Swinburne University is preparing to axe more than a dozen courses including automotive, building, cooking, food processing, government and public safety, while preparing to lift fees by between 22 and 26 percent over three years. Victoria University is to sack at least 99 teachers and close courses including events, tourism, boat building and animal studies as well as selling off its Sunbury site. TAFE colleges in regional areas will

be particularly hard hit, with at least 100 jobs to go in the Bendigo region by the end of the year. The Sunraysia region of northwestern Victoria is planning to cut \$3 million and increase fees.

The information in the leaked government document comes on top of previously announced cuts that include \$28 million from Holmesglen TAFE, \$23 million from the Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE, \$20 million from RMIT University TAFE operations, and \$29 million from Victoria University.

The Baillieu government is attempting to engineer the privatisation of technical education in Victoria, by shifting to a "user pays" model that will benefit private providers and ensure that many working class youth will be unable to access further education.

The Labor Party bears direct responsibility for the regressive measures, with the previous state Labor government of John Brumby opening up more vocational courses to the private sector in 2008. As a result, TAFE's share of enrolled technical students plummeted from 75 percent in 2007 to 48 percent in 2011, with private providers increasing their share from 14 percent to 40 percent.

The Victorian "reforms" are now being advanced nationally by Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard, who has effectively created a voucher system by allocating funds to the states on the condition that they provide an "entitlement-based student demand-driven training system" within which private operators can siphon off TAFE students in a "contestable market".

The trade unions covering TAFE staff are playing a

critical role as the accomplices of this bipartisan assault on the public provision of technical and vocational education.

Yesterday's strike was called by the Australian Education Union (AEU) and National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) in an attempt to dissipate the enormous anger among TAFE staff. The unions are attempting to block an independent struggle of TAFE workers against the state Liberal and federal Labor governments by diverting the campaign against the cuts behind the Labor Party's attempt to win the next state election, due in November 2014.

The AEU and NTEU held a rally yesterday in front of the state parliament in central Melbourne. Every union bureaucrat who addressed the crowd—including Victorian AEU president Mary Bluett, NTEU Victorian secretary Colin Long and Trades Hall chief Brian Boyd—insisted that TAFE teachers had to spend the next two years attending more protest events organised by the unions, then voting Baillieu out of office at the state election.

TAFE staff are increasingly sceptical and hostile towards this promotion of the Labor Party, which was reflected in the mass abstention of TAFE staff from the union-organised protest yesterday. Despite the state-wide protest, only about 1,000 or 2,000 people attended the rally—fewer than at a protest held last month against the TAFE cuts. Several workers at the demonstration heckled opposition leader Daniel Andrews, who was given the platform by union officials to posture as a supporter of the striking staff. (See: "Victorian TAFE teachers speak on cuts to funding")

As at previous rallies, none of the union officials or politicians who addressed the TAFE staff made any reference to the assault on public education internationally or to the growing resistance among teachers and education staff, evident in the recent Chicago teachers' strike.

Nor was mention made of the federal Labor government's role in facilitating and encouraging Baillieu's austerity agenda. There was only one reference from the official platform about the previous

state Labor government's record, by Greens' state parliamentarian Sue Pennicuk. She promoted the illusion that the Labor Party could be pressured to promise to restore funding—something Andrews has refused to do.

The Greens do not oppose the austerity agenda being imposed at the state and federal level. They are in a de facto coalition with the federal Labor government and bear direct responsibility for all of Gillard's right-wing, pro-business measures, including her attacks on public education. In Tasmania, the Labor-Green coalition is responsible for severe cuts to public spending, including to education.

To defend their jobs and conditions and ensure a future for the public education system, TAFE staff and students must take their struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracy. Rank-and-file committees should be formed in TAFE colleges, other workplaces and communities and a turn made to other sections of workers facing similar attacks.

What is necessary is a unified struggle by the working class for a workers' government to implement socialist policies. A properly resourced, fully staffed, and freely accessible public education system—at the school, university, and vocational levels—is possible only through the reorganisation of society to meet social needs of the majority, instead of profits of the wealthy few.

The Socialist Equality Party urges TAFE staff, students, and their supporters to attend our public meeting in Melbourne September 30 on "The socialist answer to Labor's program of war and austerity" to discuss these issues.



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