

Australian university union seeks to divert anger over Labor's cuts

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Having backed the Labor government and its pro-business “education revolution” since 2007, the trade union covering Australian university staff is now trying to shield the government from the outrage of staff and students over its latest \$2.8 billion funding cutback to universities.

While claiming to oppose the austerity package, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has written to university vice-chancellors, offering them advice on how best to impose the cuts without triggering opposition. The union urged the vice-chancellors to “consider deferring expenditure in other areas, such as capital works and infrastructure for the next two years, rather than cutting more staff or paring back student support services.”

Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s government has shocked many staff and students by unveiling cuts that exceed those imposed by the previous Howard Liberal government. Labor’s austerity measures include a \$900 million “efficiency dividend” and the scrapping of Student Start-up Scholarships, to save \$1.2 billion. Upfront fee discounts are being scrapped to claw back \$229 million, and a \$2,000 cap set on students’ tax deductible education expenses. This is on top of a \$1 billion reduction in research funding last November, and several earlier cuts in 2011–12.

As a result, working-class students will be under mounting financial pressure to abandon their studies. Academics and administrative staff will face far heavier workloads, and the quality of education will deteriorate further. In total, Labor has now stripped more than \$4 billion from university budgets since January 2011, and this has already contributed to hundreds of job losses, increased class sizes and greater work burdens.

This cost-cutting drive is an inseparable part of Gillard’s so-called education revolution. It will

intensify the destructive impact of Labor’s restructuring, forcing universities to poach students from each other, primarily in vocational courses designed to meet corporate requirements. The government’s market-driven regime has lifted limits on university enrolments, tied all funding to student numbers and frozen real funding per student. This has made universities dependent on cramming more students into their campuses, but starved them of the necessary resources.

Now, in order to achieve the government’s “efficiency” markers—to cut spending by 2 percent in 2014 and 1.25 percent in 2015—universities will be forced shut down courses regarded as commercially unviable, retrench more academics to make way for lowly paid casual teachers, and replace face-to-face classes by “on-line learning.”

For the past six years, the NTEU, together with the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) that covers some administrative workers, has policed Labor’s agenda. It has repeatedly helped individual universities impose sweeping job cuts and course closures in the face of intense opposition. The NTEU has also signed enterprise agreements giving managements the “flexibility” they have demanded to satisfy the government’s funding constraints, including the creation of new forms of casualised teaching and “teaching-only” academic roles.

As a result, the proportion of university employees who are casual has continued to rise under Labor, from 38.2 percent to 40.2 percent between 2007 and 2011 (up from 34.1 percent in 1996). By the NTEU’s own estimate, casuals—including poorly-paid PhD students—now deliver half of all university teaching around the country.

In the past, in order to cover its political tracks, the

NTEU blamed vice chancellors—not the Labor government—for the job and course cuts. Time and again, struggles by university workers against the destruction of jobs, courses and conditions have been diverted into supposed battles against “greedy” or wrong-headed university chiefs.

Now the NTEU is appealing to the same vice chancellors to work with it to deliver the government’s “efficiency” dictates! Far from fighting the cuts, the union is seeking to collaborate with the university managements to find ways to implement them.

The NTEU has no difference with Labor’s underlying program of radically restructuring education, along with health care and welfare, to satisfy the demands of the corporate and financial elites. While saying it objects to the university cuts, the union has hailed as “essential” the government’s accompanying “reforms” to primary and secondary school funding, which are part of the same pro-business program.

To disguise Labor’s agenda, the NTEU has criticised the government for supposedly “robbing Peter”—the universities—to “pay Paul”—the schools. In reality, in the schools—as in the universities—Labor is laying the foundations for a “user pays” voucher system that will enable the further privatisation of education at all levels. The new schools funding model aims to accelerate the shift of students into private education by extending the use of standardised test outcomes, in order to introduce “performance pay” for teachers and impose school closures, especially in working-class areas.

The NTEU has circulated a pro forma letter of protest, which praises the Labor government for “important policy initiatives” and “increased public investment” in higher education since 2009. The letter politely asks the government to “seriously reconsider” the latest cuts. No doubt, the same line will be pushed at proposed May 14 budget day protest rallies, no details of which have yet been released.

This argument is designed to sow illusions that the spending cuts are contrary to the government’s supposedly “progressive” education “revolution” and that Labor can somehow be convinced to withdraw the cutbacks. This is false to the core. The market-driven restructuring in the universities is part of a broader austerity offensive against all social spending, particularly in education, health and welfare, seeking to

make the working class pay for the global financial breakdown that erupted in 2008.

In order to fight the university cuts, staff and students have to recognise that the unions are a critical mechanism through which the cutbacks are being imposed. To defend jobs and public education means taking matters out of the hands of the NTEU and building rank-and-file committees to prosecute a political struggle against the Labor government and the profit system itself.

University staff and students need to link up with the school teachers and students, who have suffered repeated betrayals by the teachers’ unions, and every other section of the working class facing the destruction of jobs and conditions. Such a fight requires the perspective of bringing to power a workers’ government based on a socialist program, including the provision of free high quality education for all.



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