

Job cuts deepen in Australian TAFE colleges

Erika Zimmer
15 October 2014

Teachers' jobs are being destroyed at an accelerating rate, and student fees are rising sharply, in public Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges across Australia as the Abbott government intensifies funding cuts and pro-market restructuring begun under the previous Labor government.

Last month, the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) revealed that at least another 1,200 TAFE jobs are being cut in that state. That is 50 percent more than originally announced by the Liberal-National state government, whose 2012 budget called for 800 TAFE job cuts over four years and a 9.5 percent increase in student fees.

By next year, students will pay up to 45 percent of course costs. Apprentices will pay \$2,000 for a course—up from the current \$500 a year. Basic certificates will cost up to \$4,000, and a two-year Diploma of Electrical Engineering \$8,190, more than double the current \$3,038. Already, fine arts course fees have skyrocketed from a few hundred dollars to between \$8,000 and \$12,000 a year.

The hefty fees flow from the creeping privatisation of vocational education and training nationally, with for-profit operators now receiving about 40 percent of government funding. Chronically under-funded TAFE colleges are competing with private providers that pay lower wages, employ fewer staff and “cherry pick” the most lucrative courses.

As part of its overall pro-business agenda, Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard's government used funding arrangements to pressure all states and territories into signing a 2012 National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development. That established a “market” in which students must pay exorbitant fees for the basic social right to education. Private operators are essentially subsidised via a student loan scheme, while students are left with heavy debts.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott's Liberal-National

government has taken that framework further. In its May budget, it slashed another \$1 billion from the sector, on top of the \$1 billion cuts under Labor. Last month, it foreshadowed plans to reshape the vocational education system further in a pro-employer direction, gutting existing programs to set up what Abbott described as an “employer-led and outcome-focused” apprenticeship system.

According to the prime minister, the program will be shaped by industry and “local chambers of commerce” and seek to provide employers with the skills they most need to “grow their business.” In other words, the education will be narrowly tailored to satisfy the requirements of the corporate elite and local businesses, not the needs and aspirations of students. Putting it crudely, Industry Minister Ian MacFarlane said the initiative was about “training to get a job” and not “training for training's sake.”

Nationally, thousands of TAFE teachers' jobs are being axed, and student fees are increasing up to fourfold. In Victoria, where the Liberal-National state government has taken the privatisation process the furthest, over 2,500 teachers' jobs have been cut, and TAFE's “market share” of vocational education delivery has dropped from 75 percent in 2008 to 38 percent. By moving into selected niches, private operators can make substantial profits. One college, Vocation, listed on the stock exchange in 2013, netting its principals \$225 million.

This offensive is bipartisan, as is demonstrated in South Australia, where the state Labor government has cut TAFE budgets by more than 25 percent in recent years. Since 2011, nearly 300 jobs have been eliminated, with a further one in every three slated to go over the next four years.

In NSW the Teachers Federation, which is affiliated to the Australian Education Union (AEU), is solely blaming the state Liberal-National government of

Premier Mike Baird for the deepening cuts, and urging teachers, students and parents to help return Labor to office. Pat Forward, the AEU's TAFE secretary, recently blogged that the election of a Labor government in NSW at the 2015 election "could be a turning point" for TAFE.

The union, however, is responsible for the inroads being made into TAFE. Last year it pushed through an enterprise agreement that is assisting Baird's government introduce its version of the Gillard plan, called "Smart and Skilled." Due to commence next year, it will make all vocational courses "fully contestable" by cut-price commercial operators.

In 2012, TAFE NSW, the largest TAFE system in Australia, demanded a fundamental restructure of the workforce, via a new enterprise agreement. It sought to replace full- and part-time qualified teachers with less qualified or even unqualified assessors and education support officers, to be paid at less than half the hourly rate of part-time casual teachers. Teachers voted twice, in December 2012 and March 2013, to reject these demands.

A third vote on the enterprise agreement, carried out in September 2013, was supported by the NSWTF and AEU leadership, which falsely claimed that the deal was "very different" to earlier proposals and protected teachers' jobs and working conditions.

The agreement called for a ratio of one paraprofessional to every two teachers, with the "business needs" of each TAFE institute to determine the number of paraprofessionals to be hired. While the deal stated that the paraprofessionals would not "teach," the fact that they were to be used to do work previously performed by teachers, such as assessment, meant that fewer teachers would be needed. By pushing through this sellout, the union directly paved the way for the 50 percent increase in TAFE jobs axed.

Having laid the groundwork for this assault, Labor, the Greens and the union are professing outrage at the outcomes. "The increase to the fees of TAFE courses under [Premier] Mike Baird's changes will put vocational training out of reach for many people in NSW," state Labor Party leader John Robertson declared in his budget reply speech in June.

However, Robertson tabled a bill in parliament on August 14 to merely cap TAFE fees and private funding at their 2014 levels, plus inflation, even though

this would still leave government funding at less than 50 percent below its 1997 level.

Likewise, the Greens' John Kaye declared last month that TAFE was "too precious to lose" and urged teachers to email Liberal and National MPs "who are presiding over the 'Smart and Skilled' reforms" in order "hold them to account for this unfolding devastation." He moved an alternative "moratorium" bill that would freeze fees and funding at their 2010–11 levels, insisting that this would represent a victory. It would, however, still leave government funding well below the 1997 level.

On the back of this posturing by Labor and the Greens, the NSW Teachers Federation is trying to block any independent fight by teachers and students against the cuts, and appealing to them to support Labor and the Greens in the 2015 state election. However, any return to a Labor-led government would only mean a further intensification of the destructive processes demanded by the corporate and financial elite.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact