

New Zealand government prepares attack on foreign students

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New Zealand's Labour Party-led coalition government, which includes the Greens and the right-wing NZ First, is preparing to slash foreign student numbers as part of a broader assault on immigrants and the country's tertiary education system. It plans to cut immigration by 20,000 to 30,000 entrants per year, or up to 40 percent, mostly by targeting students.

International students would no longer be permitted to work while studying unless they are enrolled in a bachelor's degree program, or the school provides work as part of their study. Graduates from lower-level courses will be barred from applying for a 12-month post-study visa.

According to Labour's web site, its proposed changes will result in 6,000 to 10,000 fewer student visas and a reduction of 9,000 to 12,000 post-study work visas. New regionalised skills shortage lists will reduce the number of work visas by a further 5,000 to 8,000.

The web site asserts that immigration has "contributed to the housing crisis, put pressure on hospitals and schools, and added to the congestion on roads." Working with the Trump-like NZ First, the Labour Party is scapegoating immigrants to divert attention from the real source of the social crisis. For decades, Labour and National Party governments alike have carried out pro-business restructuring and austerity measures, including cuts to health, education and housing. The lack of affordable housing is the result of rampant speculation by investors, of whom the overwhelming majority are privileged layers in New Zealand.

By whipping up anti-Chinese xenophobia, in particular, the government is also seeking to condition the population to support a US-led military conflict with China.

The tertiary education system has suffered decades of

cuts and user-pays policies, beginning with the 1980s Labour government's introduction of student fees. Successive governments have encouraged ruthless, profit-driven business practices in major universities and smaller private training establishments (PTEs), resulting in hundreds of cuts to academic jobs and wages and the closure of departments and entire institutions.

Labour campaigned for the September 23 election with a fraudulent promise of "free education." In fact, course fees will be abolished for one year, for first-time students only. This will not ease the pressure on tertiary institutions or reduce the \$15 billion total student debt. International students, who frequently pay \$20,000 to \$40,000 in course fees annually, will not be eligible for any free courses. This includes Australians who have not lived in New Zealand for at least three years.

Labour will continue the National government's crackdown on training providers offering qualifications below a bachelor's degree to international students, which Labour described as a "back door" for residency.

The party's web site states that, "10,000 fewer Private Training Establishment enrolments will reduce fee revenues by \$70 million." This will force smaller PTEs, which often provide training in specialist trades such as IT, to shut down, making thousands of teachers and academic staff redundant.

When Labour announced its immigration policy in June, Independent Tertiary Education New Zealand representative Christine Clark warned it could cause 70 percent of the PTE sector to collapse. On October 31, she told Radio New Zealand the changes to student visas and rules for lower-level training establishments would result in "up to 10,000 job losses."

There have been hundreds of job cuts in the tertiary education sector already in recent years.

Unitec, in Auckland, announced 300 job cuts in 2015. In April 2017, Waikato University cut 17 jobs in its Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Otago University confirmed in October that it would cut 160 equivalent full-time positions. Also in October, NorthTec announced a plan to axe 50 jobs and potentially close down its campuses in Kerikeri and Rawene.

The Labour government will preside over hundreds more job cuts.

In early December, Auckland-based Best Pacific Institute of Education announced its closure after a funding cut by the government, affecting 150 staff and 1,200 students.

In November, 1,000 staff throughout Massey University's Auckland, Wellington and Manawatu campuses were sent letters asking for voluntary resignations as the university sought to slash around 90 jobs as part of a drive to cut \$15.7 million in costs. Over 70 staff accepted offers to resign, including several internationally sought-after scientists.

The government's Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) sets unrealistic passing and retention targets, often as high as 85 percent, for institutions to qualify for government funding. These targets increase annually. A Tertiary Education Union (TEU) survey in March 2017 found 63 percent of educators felt pressured to pass failing or cheating students so institutions could continue accepting their fees to offset reduced government funding.

University lecturers also complained of pressure to produce "worthless" research, at the expense of teaching time, so their institute would be eligible for the Performance Based Research Funding system, which Labour introduced in 2003.

Labour bears chief responsibility for the ongoing cuts to tertiary education. After introducing fees in 1989, Labour passed the Education Amendment Act in 1990, which made all tertiary institutes independent legal entities, dropped the exclusivity of bachelor's degrees from universities, and encouraged competition between institutes. The act laid the foundation for PTEs to proliferate.

Government funding for PTEs began under the Clark Labour government in 2000, based on the number of students enrolled. Labour established the TEC in 2003, which determines the amount of funding an institute receives based on how successfully it can turn a profit.

Far from fighting the assault, the TEU has assisted the job cuts by keeping each dispute isolated and opposing any political and industrial campaign against austerity. The union sought to subordinate workers to Labour's election campaign and issued a December 15 statement falsely declaring that the new government is "committed to publicly funded and publicly controlled tertiary education."

Last June, the union endorsed Labour's plan to cut foreign student numbers, claiming this would shield institutions from global market volatility. On September 28, the TEU also praised the right-wing populist NZ First's Tracey Martin as "a passionate advocate of accessible education at all levels."

In opposition to the nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective of the unions and the political establishment, the Socialist Equality Group and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) insist that everyone must have the right to study and work in any country they choose, with full democratic rights.

Billions of dollars are needed to restore the education system, wipe out student debt and provide free, accessible education and decent living allowances for all students. Staff must be guaranteed job security, high wages and a manageable workload. Education must be made genuinely public and freed from the narrow interests of big business and the profit system.

We call on students who support these socialist demands to join the IYSSE and help us to establish branches at universities, polytechs, PTEs and high schools.



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