

New Zealand: Staff cuts and library closures at the University of Auckland

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New Zealand's largest tertiary institution, the University of Auckland, is preparing to close three specialist libraries and cut 45 jobs in a cost-saving restructure. The Fine Arts, Architecture, and Music and Dance libraries will be consolidated into the General Library. The cuts were foreshadowed earlier this year and confirmed on June 21, despite a wave of protests in opposition.

The closures are the result of austerity measures imposed by successive Labour and National Party governments, which have drained funding from education and other essential public services, such as healthcare, in order to fund tax cuts for the rich and significantly increase spending on the military, prisons and police.

Among those whose jobs will be eliminated are five eminent musicians, including Professor Uwe Grodd, who has played flute and conducted orchestras internationally for over three decades. The music department's staff-to-student ratio will increase from 1:11.6 to 1:14.

The Faculty of Education and Social Work will shed about 23 staff, a 15 percent reduction, despite a nationwide shortage of primary and secondary teachers. Eleven jobs in languages are also being cut and some language courses may be scrapped altogether.

Reports that over 10,000 books could be destroyed have also raised alarm. Libraries director Sue Roberts said books may be shredded if they are outdated, or if the university owns multiple copies or electronic versions.

On April 28, students and staff occupied the Fine Arts library in protest. About 1,000 people attended a rally the following day, including students and staff, who delivered a 4,000-signature petition to Vice-Chancellor Stuart McCutcheon denouncing the closures.

McCutcheon says the cuts are needed to save between \$3 and \$4 million.

On May 17, as the Labour Party-led government announced its budget with a zero increase in funding for the country's eight universities, some students blockaded Auckland's busy Symonds Street for several hours.

When the cuts were confirmed on June 21, dozens of protesters flooded the corridor outside the Dean of the Creative Arts. Tony Green, a former art history professor, told Radio NZ the restructure meant "the death of fine arts" at the university.

Rachel Ashby, a graduate from the university's Elam School of Fine Arts, denounced the vice-chancellor's more than \$700,000 annual salary. She told *Newshub*: "How can somebody who is earning almost twice as much as the prime minister of our country... make an ethical decision [about] 45 other people's livelihoods?"

The protests are part of a developing movement of workers in New Zealand who have begun to fight back against low pay and poor working conditions. Tens of thousands of nurses recently voted for national strike action after rejecting inadequate pay offers from the government's District Health Boards. School teachers are currently voting on whether to accept a pay offer of just over 2 percent and there are predictions that they will also strike. Transport and fast food workers have also recently taken industrial action.

With tertiary enrolments dropping by 70,000 between 2009 and 2016, the Tertiary Education Union (TEU) estimates that there is a \$3.7 billion funding hole for universities and polytechnics. Following the 2017 election, Labour introduced free tertiary education for some students but only for the first year of study. Student numbers are continuing to fall, largely due to the high costs associated with studying, including rising

rent and food expenses.

Foreign student numbers are likely to decline. Labour and its coalition partners, the Greens and NZ First, have agreed to restrict the ability of foreign students to work in New Zealand during and after their course of study. Economist Miles Workman has warned that this anti-immigrant policy will cost the economy \$100 million a year. International students spend an average of \$16,000 a year on course fees.

Several tertiary providers have already slashed staff and courses. Unitec has cut over 300 staff since 2015. Last year, Otago University announced 160 jobs would be axed, while Waikato University and Massey University have also eliminated dozens of positions.

The TEU has collaborated with tertiary management in this job destruction. When Otago University announced the axing of 20 positions in Humanities in 2016, a union spokesman pleaded with the university to “slow down and reconsider its options.” Similarly, in 2015, the TEU told the Unitec council it would work with managers to impose job cuts “in such ways that staff are brought along with the changes; and at a pace that will allow change to bed in.”

In a statement on May 29, the TEU said the Auckland cuts will “put at risk the university’s reputation” and “undermine” Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s “vision for education.” In the 2017 election the union promoted the Labour Party fraudulently claiming that it represented a progressive alternative to the National Party.

On June 27, the TEU declared that Labour “should be congratulated” for its announcement that tertiary funding will be increased by a minuscule 1.6 percent from 2019, just above the rate of inflation.

Labour governments have systematically attacked tertiary students. The 1984–1990 Labour government introduced the first student fees in 1989. In 1990, Labour also introduced the Education Amendment Act to encourage competition and expand the private tertiary sector—i.e., attack jobs and working conditions. Then-education minister Phil Goff is now mayor of Auckland. Last year he oversaw the destruction of 194 jobs and other cuts at the city’s public libraries.

Under the 1999–2008 Labour government student fees soared and total student debt expanded from \$3 billion to \$10 billion between 2000 and 2008.

While there is growing opposition to the austerity

measures at New Zealand universities, the perspective of the Auckland demonstrations was dominated by the recently-formed group, A New University (ANU), which called for the vice chancellor to resign, for staff and student control of the university and more government funding.

The ANU is supported by the pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation (ISO). It campaigned for a Labour Party government and insists that it can be pressured to “scrap” its budget restraints and increase funding for “education, housing and welfare.”

Last October the ISO proclaimed that Labour’s coalition deal with the anti-immigrant NZ First had produced an agenda “better than the International Socialists dared hope possible.” This statement has been completely discredited by the ongoing cutbacks across the public sector.

The urgent task is to unite all workers and students in New Zealand in a political struggle against the Labour government based on a socialist perspective. The basic right to free, high-quality education is incompatible with capitalism, which subordinates every aspect of social life to the needs of private profit.

Students and university staff should form independent rank-and-file committees to coordinate their struggles with nurses, teachers and other workers, in New Zealand, Australia, the US and other countries where public services are under attack. This requires a decisive political break from Labour, the Greens, the pro-capitalist unions and the pseudo-lefts organisations.



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