

A socialist program needed to halt assault on university students and staff

Mike Head: SEP candidate for Oxley
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University students and staff alike are paying a terrible price for the worsening under-funding and de facto privatisation of Australia's public universities by successive Liberal-National and Labor governments.

Ever-larger class sizes, soaring student fee debts, rampant casualisation and corporate restructuring have increasingly dominated campuses for decades.

- More than 63 percent of staff at universities in the state of Victoria are now in insecure work. Leading the way, Melbourne and Monash universities have over 72 percent of their staff on casual or fixed-term contracts.

- As at January 2019, the total level of outstanding domestic student fee (HELP) debt was \$62 billion—a five-fold increase since 2005-06. Over that period, the average level of debt has more than doubled to \$21,557. More than 200,000 young people have debts exceeding \$50,000.

These two statistics alone indicate the nature and extent of the crisis.

Facing a lifetime of debt, students are under huge financial pressure to work long hours while they are still at university, making it very difficult to properly study. At the same time, university teachers like myself are being told to take larger and larger classes, such as “tutorials” of 70, which make a further mockery of genuine teaching and learning.

University vice-chancellors and other top managers have become highly-paid corporate executives, driven by ruthless cost-cutting and profit-making plans. They ride roughshod over the concerns of educators and researchers, as well as students.

This assault has accelerated at a great pace over the past 10 years since the last Labor government imposed its pro-market “education revolution.” Labor’s scheme has transformed the universities into business-dominated institutions, heavily dependent on corporate

partnerships and competing desperately with each other to enrol students, primarily in business and vocational courses.

While boasting of having lifted caps on student enrolments, the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard cut \$2.7 billion from tertiary funding in 2013, initiating a cost-cutting drive that the Liberal-National Coalition government has intensified ever since.

Yet, the student and staff unions are again imploring their members to campaign and vote for another big business Labor government.

According to the “election scorecard” issued by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), only Labor and the Greens tick the boxes for defending higher education, by contrast with the Coalition. These are the sole choices offered by the union. This is a fraud, and a complete rewriting of history.

The truth is that the Socialist Equality Party is the only one calling for the vast redistribution of wealth needed to secure the basic social rights of all, including free, high-quality public education at all levels, from kindergartens to universities and technical colleges.

As we explain in our election statement, this means expropriating the major banks and corporate giants—including the proliferating private education conglomerates—and placing them under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.

The NTEU is deliberately obscuring its own role. While the trade unions claim to have opposed the assault on students and staff, union-negotiated enterprise agreements have helped managements casualise their workforces to one of the highest levels in any industry.

As a result, education workers often spend several

months of the year without employment or knowing whether they will be re-employed. Students inevitably suffer as well, with less access to consultation with teachers and support staff.

Because of the cuts imposed by Labor and Coalition governments alike, students, both domestic and international, are paying ever-higher fees. Full fee-paying overseas students, often being charged more than \$30,000 a year, have become “cash cows” for financially-starved universities and related businesses, injecting more than \$32 billion per year into the coffers of Australian capitalism.

While the crisis has been intensified by a two-year-old funding freeze and cuts to research grants by the current Coalition government, Labor governments have laid the basis for it.

The offensive began in the late 1980s, when the Hawke Labor government reintroduced fees, first for international students and then for their domestic classmates. This was part of its restructuring of the entire economy, dictated by the corporate and financial elites, at the direct expense of the working class.

Even worse is to come. Regardless of whether Labor or the Coalition heads the next government, new “performance targets” will make any funding increases depend on universities “realigning” their course offerings to be more in tune with the requirements of the corporate elite.

Last year, Labor Party deputy leader Tanya Plibersek announced another “once in a generation” review of post-secondary education, just 10 years after Labor’s last one—the Bradbury review—which led to the pro-market “revolution.”

A panel packed with corporate representatives, including Business Council of Australia chief executive Jennifer Westacott, will seek to further tie universities and technical colleges to the needs of business, churning out graduates tailor-made for major employers.

In February, Plibersek bluntly declared that in return for lifting student enrolment caps, supposedly generating an extra \$10 billion in fee revenue over 10 years, a Labor government would require universities to “meet community expectations” specified in signed funding agreements.

For “community expectations” read “corporate expectations” and other “national priorities” like

military-linked research.

In an “exclusive” interview with the *Australian Financial Review* on May 2, Plibersek put universities on notice that they would not get any extra money for research. She also demanded stronger “university-industry” linkages and greater “commercialisation” of research.

All this is anathema to the very concept of universities as institutions of higher learning and critical inquiry, encouraging and allowing young people to develop deeper understandings of history, society, the earth’s environment and the universe.

To fight for the fundamental social right of all young people to a free, first-class education and the right of all staff to decent, well-paid and secure positions, university workers and students need to make a decisive political break from Labor and the Greens, along with the NTEU and all the other education trade unions.

What is required is a fight for a workers’ government and a socialist perspective, aimed at the complete reorganisation of society in the interests of all, not the profits of the wealthy few. We urge all those who want to take part to contact the Socialist Equality Party and the Committee for Public Education it has established to lead this struggle.

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