

Australian governments refuse to assist international students amid pandemic

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Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison told a press conference earlier this month that his government would not provide any support to international students and visa-holders whose lives have been disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic and global economic downturn.

Speaking for the entire political establishment, Morrison callously declared that international students who cannot support themselves in Australia should “return to their home countries.”

There are some 2.17 million international students, workers and backpackers on temporary visas who currently reside in Australia. Many of them face visa expirations, unemployment and travel restrictions. It is estimated that there are as many as 570,000 student visa-holders in Australia.

When the crisis began, no concessions were provided so that visa-holders could afford tickets for flights which more than doubled in cost. Numerous countries rapidly locked down their borders limiting travel arrangements. The ending of most international flights from Australia means that hundreds of thousands are now effectively trapped.

Promoting divisive nationalism, Morrison declared at the press conference, “our priority is on supporting Australians.” In reality, the government, with the full support of Labor and the unions, has provided hundreds of billions of dollars to the major corporations, while virtually nothing has been done to assist the million of workers thrown into unemployment.

In an attempt to deflect anger over the lack of support, acting Immigration Minister Alan Tudge later stated that temporary visa holders who have been in the country for over a year will be able to access their Australian superannuation for support.

Given that visa-holders are among the lowest-paid of

workers, their superannuation will be woefully inadequate to cover their basic living expenses. They are, moreover, being forced to deplete their limited savings just to survive.

Under regressive visa laws, international students have a 20-hour weekly limit on paid work. They are also prevented from accessing essential medical and social services. This has made it virtually impossible for students to save money and secure full-time work.

Most with a job are exploited as cheap labour. Many have been forced into low-paying, sometimes dangerous, cash-in-hand jobs in the fruit picking, retail and hospitality industries. Others work in the “gig economy,” as ride-share and food delivery drivers.

A recent survey of over 3,700 visa-holders, conducted by Unions New South Wales, revealed that almost half of the participants had lost their jobs since the crisis began. A further 20 percent said that their number of working hours had been cut. Some 43 percent said that they had to skip meals.

Even before the pandemic began, many international students were living on the precipice of a crisis.

According to 2017 figures from Universities Australia, one in two international undergraduate students reported overall expenses greater than their income. About 50 percent were in paid casual or part-time employment with a median of 15 hours a week. Almost nine in ten were compelled to rely on financial support from relatives.

International students have been heavily affected by unaffordable housing costs in the major cities, especially Sydney and Melbourne. Thousands have been forced into crowded shared accommodation where the disease can spread like wildfire.

Many now confront the prospect of homelessness. Andrea Andrade from Venezuela, who has been

studying at a TAFE in Perth since 2018 and recently lost her job, told SBS News: “I cannot pay rent, I cannot pay food. We did try talking to our landlords but they cannot help us. I have savings but it’s only a matter of time before that runs out. I do have family who can help me in case of an emergency ... but they’re going through the same situation.”

Marcos Bento, a Brazilian student who came to Australia four years ago, told the Special Broadcasting Services network : “If I had the four or five thousand dollars to buy one ticket back to Brazil... if I had money to go back to Brazil I would have money to support myself here.”

After losing his job in Sydney, he said: “I have no idea about the future, no money to pay rent... We are afraid about the situation, we know you are meant to stay home, but if you stay home you must have food and rent or else you go homeless.”

Bento said that he had spent over \$40,000 to study in Australia for his master's degree in public health which is due to finish in September. He said leaving the country now could mean he will fail his course and that his fees will have been wasted. He said the university had not provided him with options to finish his degree remotely.

For decades, international students have been exploited as 'cash-cows' paying astronomical upfront tertiary course fees, usually in the tens of thousands of dollars a year. In 2019, the international student “market” was worth approximately \$37 billion, comprising almost 40 percent of Australia’s exports of services and 9 percent of total exports.

It was the Hawke Labor government that in 1985 introduced full upfront fees for international students. This was a prelude to the abolition of free education two years later, with fees brought in for domestic students. Ever since, revenue from international students has grown considerably under consecutive Labor and Liberal-National governments.

Labor has bemoaned the impact that the crisis will have on the multi-billion dollar university model, but has said virtually nothing about the dire plight of international students, making clear that their abandonment is bipartisan policy. State governments, many of them Labor-led, have similarly done nothing to assist the students.

The indifference of the political establishment

contrasts with the response of ordinary people. In a number of cities, workers have organised to provide international students with cheap or free groceries and other essentials. Some small businesses in Sydney and elsewhere have given international students a free meal each day.

The situation confronting international students is part of the offensive against the entire working class, which is being made to pay for the crisis triggered by the pandemic. It underscores the need for a fight by all students and workers for the social right to free, high-quality education for all, and for an end to the discriminatory measures targeting international students and visa-holders.



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