

Committee For Public Education online public forum

The COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis in the universities

16 May 2020

The Committee For Public Education (CFPE) invites all university workers, students and teachers to attend its online forum on Sunday May 17 at 4 p.m. (Australian Eastern Time) to discuss the coronavirus pandemic and the deep crisis in the universities, both in Australia and internationally.

The pandemic, which was both foreseeable and foreseen, continues to spread around the world. This is a damning indictment of the capitalist system. The massive loss of life and livelihoods is not simply the product of a virus but the policy decisions of governments. The pandemic has been responded to more as an economic crisis than a health one. Trillions of dollars in bailout packages have been provided, not for health care or education, but to prop up the profits of corporations and the banks.

Now these same governments, from Trump to Morrison, demand rapid returns to workplaces, including schools and universities, even though they know that deadly infections are likely to result. At the same time, the crisis is being used to impose the slashing of the wages and conditions of those being forced back to work.

The trade unions are enforcing this offensive. In the universities, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is seeking to push through agreements, after backroom talks with managements, that will allow such attacks to proceed. This includes allowing employers to axe casual jobs and ask staff to do additional work.

The NTEU's "landmark" national agreement sets a new precedent for union-enforced pay and job cutting. It allows university managements to not only cut wages by up to 15 percent but also destroy thousands of jobs, including by forced redundancies.

These will not be temporary cuts. The universities

face revenue losses of some \$19 billion over the next three years. This shortfall is to be paid for through the assault on the livelihoods of academics, tutors, administrative staff and the courses offered to students, who face larger classes.

We need to reject the false choice being put forward by the governments, management and the unions—accept such concessions or risk redundancies.

The crisis in the universities did not start with the pandemic. They have been starved of funds for years, with billions of dollars cut by every government since the Gillard Labor-Greens government, and increasingly transformed into business operations, fighting each other for "market share."

The attack on educators is also driven by the US-led confrontation with China, heightening the danger of another catastrophic world war for global capitalist hegemony. Having been forced by budget cuts to exploit international students as cash cows, the universities are being punished for alleged over-reliance on Chinese students.

These international students have been abandoned by the government and left to fend for themselves with no support or means to return home. Many are homeless and reliant on foodbanks to survive.

The CFPE advances a socialist and internationalist perspective. We call for the formation of Action Committees at schools and universities to coordinate genuine opposition to these attacks, independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions, and to ensure the health and safety of all educators, students and the working people as a whole.

Please join us to discuss these issues. The forum will include contributions from colleagues in universities and schools, and from the equally devastated

universities in the UK, as well as from the International Youth and Students for Social Equality. All educators and students looking for a way forward against the wholesale offensive on universities and the disaster triggered by the pandemic are urged to take part in the May 17 forum.

To participate contact the **CFPE Facebook** site or email the SEP at sep@sep.org.au, or click on this Zoom link just before 4 p.m. on Sunday:
<https://zoom.us/j/94447278547>



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