Australia: International students voice anger over wage theft, poor working conditions

Our reporters
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The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) spoke with international students from universities around Australia this week about their dire circumstances, which have worsened amid the coronavirus pandemic and the criminally negligent policies of governments.

A recent report highlighted egregious levels of wage theft targeting international students working in Australia to pay for rent, food and exorbitant course fees. It warned that financial hardship brought on by the coronavirus crisis will exacerbate the exploitation of international students.

Governments have done virtually nothing to aid the hundreds of thousands of international students enrolled at universities across Australia. Many lost their jobs due to limited social distancing measures when lockdowns began in March. Now, amid a profit-driven, back to work campaign, they are being forced back into low-wage positions with poor conditions, and the threat of contracting the potentially deadly virus.

The IYSSE spoke with a Pakistani student at Victoria University in Melbourne who said he lives "hand to mouth. I cannot save anything. I pay so much for the fees at university and there are no jobs."

He said universities gave a one-off payment of $1,200 to international students from the government, but he has received only $700 so far. The student said "universities aren't taking any real measures.… There is no help for us students."

A business student from China studying at Brisbane's Griffith University told the IYSSE that he previously worked part-time in restaurants and supermarkets, but had not received shifts since the pandemic began.

He said: "I have rarely heard of Chinese students ever getting the legal minimum wage. The maximum wage I have ever received is $18 per hour and the lowest wage I've ever received is $12 per hour." The statutory minimum wage in Australia for part-time workers aged 20 is $18.49 per hour and $18.93 for workers aged 21.

"For international students," he said, "fighting for the minimum wage is an uneconomical trouble—few international students receive assistance in this area.… It will affect students' future work and life. Most of the time, students are reluctant to cause trouble."

Like all the other students the IYSSE spoke to, the Chinese student indicated that neither the Australian government nor the government of his home country have given any assistance. He noted that "the Morrison government has made it clear that it will not provide financial assistance to international students who encounter financial difficulties, and has said they should return to their country. He claimed that this was about putting Australia's 'national interest' first."

The student told the IYSSE that, even if international students wanted to go home, governments have either closed borders, restricted flights or the price of tickets has sky-rocketed.

The student also pointed to the "relationship between Australia and China undoubtedly becoming more and more tense, and the impact on international students is becoming more and more obvious."

He said the United States' threatened expulsion of Chinese students and the anti-China propaganda of the US, the UK and Australia make "increasingly clear" their "military hostility toward China." "But I always believe that most Australians are against war and racism," he added.

An IYSSE member distributed a questionnaire to 15 Chinese students. Of the respondents, one student's wage was less than $10 per hour and 5 students' wages were $10–15 per hour. None of the students reported wages above $20 per hour.

A third of the respondents said they "never expected to receive the legal minimum wage." They all agreed that the Australian government was not helping international students. Some students pointed to a Chinese embassy program to distribute hygiene products to international students when lockdowns began, but said that it was insufficient. One student wrote in a comment: "Chinese students overseas were abandoned."

Another student from Victoria University, 22-year-old Amir, told the IYSSE that he lost his job when the COVID-19 crisis broke out. "As international students, we have a lot of expenses like food, clothes, rent and insurance. My parents from Lebanon help me financially, but our country's economy now is not good, so the banks refuse to give my family a loan. That makes it extra difficult as they were helping me get through this."

Speaking on his studies, Amir said "universities shut down to protect the students. Studying online is really difficult, though. The environment to study is not good, the connection to Zoom is not good, you cannot get good communication with friends and others in the class. There are also so many distractions, it's hard to focus."

Amir said his accounting course costs $14,000 per semester, adding "but it is all online now. We aren't using the university facilities, but it is the same cost. It is a really tough year for everybody and we have to pay it up front. There is no indication we are going to get any money back and they say I have to pay my future fees by July 31 or I get a late fine."

Tharindu, originally from Sri Lanka, is a 29-year-old masters student at the Victorian Institute of Technology in central Melbourne. He lost his job as a cleaner at Monash University shortly after lockdowns were introduced in March. The contractor fired anyone with less than five years' experience.

Tharindu managed to find another job as a childcare cleaner, but noted that it is uncommon for international students to get work as quickly as he had. He is earning $17 per hour for his part-time job.

Tharindu noted that working as a cleaner during the pandemic "is not a pleasant experience," adding, "we work under a lot of pressure because it is a cleaning job, so there are greater risks for everyone in cleaning jobs."

The only precautions offered by the contractor were to advise that the workers get a government certificate regarding COVID-19 prevention and detection, and fill out questionnaires to report if they have any COVID-19 symptoms and to leave the premises if they do.

Tharindu said he had to provide his own mask for work. Concerned for his health, Tharindu noted that international students are not eligible for government assistance for healthcare and are forced to pay thousands of dollars to get health insurance in order to secure a visa.

He added that "the situation has changed all over the world" as a result of the pandemic and that many parents of international students "are not able to send money for them as usual." He said that he knows other international students who relied on not-for-profits and donations for food.

"Even though I don't want to work during COVID-19, I have to work," Tharindu said. "We know there is a greater risk for cleaners, but there's nothing else we can do because it is a very hard time for our parents as well. In Sri Lanka, they are on the brink of not having a wage because the government was saying they don't have enough money to pay salaries."

Tharindu described his financial situation as "very hard," stating "we don't even buy clothes anymore. We have to focus on the essentials only."

Denouncing the "nationalist response" of the Australian and other governments around the world to the pandemic, Tharindu said international students were shocked when Prime Minister Scott Morrison said that they should "go home" if they can't afford their expenses. "My friends were fearful of what was going to happen because we were also unable to go home—there were no flights," he said.

"We are considered only as a means of income for the universities, not more than that," Tharindu stated. Governments "label some groups—you are students, migrants, temporary workers—and try to find a way to avoid providing assistance and help to them," he said.