

Australian university union documents the damage of Labor’s “education revolution”

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The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is advocating for the return of another Labor Party-led government despite releasing a report that provides a damning picture of the immensely destructive impact of the last Labor government’s pro-market “education revolution” on Australia’s public universities over the past decade.

In response to the Liberal-National Coalition government’s latest May 11 federal budget, the NTEU urged its members to direct their outrage toward “changing” the government at the next federal election. By implication, that means backing Labor and the Greens, who propped up the last Labor government from 2010 to 2013.

The budget cut university funding by another 9.3 percent in real terms from 2021–22 to 2024–25, on top of devastating revenue losses and up to 90,000 job cuts in 2020–2021, and a decade of deepening under-funding.

To bolster its message, the trade union is talking up the prospect of an early election, even though Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government has until next May to call one.

Writing in the May edition of *Sentry*, the union’s online magazine, NTEU policy and research director Terri MacDonald declared: “With talk of a federal election possible even as early as the second half of the year, the message is clear—if the Government will not change its attitude towards higher education, then we need to change this Government.”

Once again, as it did in 2007, when the NTEU urged support for the election of the Rudd Labor government, and at every election since, the union is peddling illusions that another Greens-backed Labor government would reverse the assault on the universities, and public education as a whole.

Yet the NTEU’s pre-budget submission, issued before the May 11 budget, admits that successive governments, both Labor-Greens and Liberal-National, have slashed funding per student since 2012. That was when the last Labor government of Julia Gillard fully implemented the “Demand Driven System,” initially drawn up while Gillard was Rudd’s deputy prime minister and minister for education.

The NTEU submission states: “Since the introduction of the Demand Driven System (DDS) by the Rudd/Gillard government, both sides of politics have tried to achieve substantial budgetary savings by targeting higher education.

“In 2013 (only one year after DDS was fully implemented) the ALP [Australian Labor Party] introduced an efficiency dividend on university teaching grants—reclaiming over \$900m.”

In keeping with its own record of support for that Labor-Greens government, the NTEU is covering up the extent of Labor’s attack. The “efficiency dividend” was only part of the funding cuts under Rudd and Gillard, which totalled \$3.8 billion by the time Labor lost office in a landslide in 2013, after its pro-business program generated hostility throughout the working class.

What the NTEU submission does not mention is that the union fully backed the Rudd-Gillard blueprint, defending it against the exposure and opposition of members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP).

The NTEU hailed the election of the Rudd government, claiming that it would deliver a new progressive era of higher education after 11 years of Liberal-National cutbacks and attacks on the rights of students and university workers. “The union looks forward to working with the new government to flesh out what the ‘Education Revolution’ means for universities,” the NTEU stated.

From the outset, in 2007, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned that this “education revolution,” which targeted government schools as well as tertiary education, was a “third wave” of economic restructuring in favour of the corporate elite. As Rudd and Gillard themselves stated, their measures built on the first two “waves” of privatisation and attacks on working class conditions, which were implemented by the Hawke and Keating governments of 1983 to 1996, in partnership with the trade unions.

SEP members consistently fought against the efforts of the NTEU to impose the requirements of the “Demand Driven System” via enterprise bargaining agreements negotiated with individual university managements. They explained that this market approach to education forced universities to compete with each other for enrolments in the most money-making courses, tailor their teaching programs to the needs of employers, and seek alternative sources of revenue, including from exorbitant international student fees.

These warnings have been proven totally correct. While the

Labor government lifted limits on university enrolments, it tied all funding to student numbers and froze real funding per student. This made universities dependent on cramming more students, especially full-fee paying international students, into their campuses, but starved them of the necessary resources.

The “revolution” also accelerated the casualisation of the university workforces. Via enterprise agreements, the NTEU worked with university managements to give them the “flexibility” they demanded to be able to open and shut courses, semester by semester, to capture greater “market share.”

After 2013, the current Liberal-National government retained and exploited this framework to deepen the assault on university workers and students. Despite being forced by widespread opposition to abandon plans to allow universities to charge domestic students unlimited fees in 2014, the Coalition tightened the squeeze of the “Demand Driven System,” including by freezing funding levels in 2018 and 2019.

Last year, Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government went further by denying public universities financial support when the COVID-19 pandemic struck their international student revenues, and by introducing a “Jobs-Ready Graduate” plan that further reduces government funding per domestic student by 14 percent, while doubling tuition fees in humanities.

The statistics in the NTEU submission show that by 2017, the “education revolution” had already led to the chronically underfunded public universities depending more on international student fees than government payments for domestic student enrolments. This process intensified until 2019, the last year before the pandemic, when the universities obtained close to \$10 billion in overseas student fee income, compared to about \$7.5 billion in Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS) funding.

By 2019, some 221,780 people were employed at the universities, of which only about one-in-three had permanent or ongoing employment. Almost one-in-two (99,492 or 45 percent) were employed as casuals and one-in-five (45,575 or 20 percent) were on limited term contracts. The proportion of insecurely employed staff had increased from 60 percent in 2000 to 65 percent in 2019.

The sharpest rises in casual and short-term work occurred among “teaching-only” and “research-only” positions, which the NTEU also facilitated by enterprise agreements. By 2018, only about 15 percent of the academics employed in such roles had secure employment, undermining the previously hard-won rights to tenure for more traditional teaching and research academics.

In its budget submission the NTEU again proposed, as it has since 2015, the adoption of a modified version of the Demand Driven System, which would consist of “Public Accountability Agreements” between the government and individual universities. This framework would seek to give “individual universities the flexibility to pursue their own missions.”

That proposal would dovetail with the bipartisan agenda of

the Coalition government and Labor to push universities to specialise in order to more closely meet the commercial and vocational demands of employers. It would be a new stage in the “education revolution” gutting and restructuring of the universities.

It would also keep university staff straitjacketed within the enterprise bargaining regime imposed by the Keating Labor government and the unions in the 1990s, splitting workers into individual workplaces and tying them to the profit-making requirements of each competing university management.

University workers, together with students, need to review these bitter political experiences, assess the NTEU’s record and draw definite conclusions. There is one central lesson. It is clearly impossible to defend public education without a fundamental break with the thoroughly pro-corporate NTEU, as well as the political servants of big business: Labor and the Greens.

Worldwide, the transnational conglomerates and wealthy elites are using the global pandemic disaster, for which they themselves are responsible, to ratchet up their decades-long offensive against the jobs, conditions and essential social programs of the working class, including public education and healthcare.

What is necessary is the formation of rank-and-file committees of staff and students, totally independent of all the trade unions, and a turn to other sections of educators and workers in Australia and internationally facing this intensified onslaught.

Such a struggle requires a socialist perspective that rejects the dictates of the financial markets and fights for the complete reorganisation of society in the interests of all, not the soaring profits and wealth accumulation of the billionaires. That includes halting the massive handouts to the corporate elite and providing the tens of billions of dollars needed to establish free, high quality education, from kindergarten to university, and the basic right of all education workers to full-time employment with decent pay and conditions.

This is the program advanced by the Committee for Public Education, established by the Socialist Equality Party, as part of the worldwide fight for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. We urge all those who want to take forward this global struggle to contact the Committee for Public Education.



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