

# The historic assault on university education and Australia's anti-democratic electoral laws

Jack Turner  
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The Liberal-National Coalition government is exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic to accelerate the pro-business restructuring of Australia's universities. Already thousands of jobs have been eliminated over the past 18 months in an unprecedented offensive.

The resulting deep hostility among university staff and students is part of the rising political discontent that drove Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government, with the full support of the Labor Party to rush through new electoral laws in August. These require parties without members of parliament to treble their membership lists from 500 to 1,500 or face de-registration, removing their right to have their party names on ballot papers.

The transparent aim of the legislation is to prop up the despised major parties. Above all, its purpose is to prevent the growing disaffection among youth and throughout the working class from turning towards a socialist perspective and the Socialist Equality Party, the only party that has fought for a unified struggle by educators and students against the university onslaught.

Throughout 2020 and 2021, university managements have ruthlessly restructured academic and administrative departments. The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) estimated that in 2020 alone up to 90,000 jobs were lost, but it has opposed any industrial action to halt the assault. Encouraged by the NTEU's record, the employers have forced university workers to compete against each other for dwindling positions.

This has had a disastrous impact on students' education at every level. Class sizes have soared while course choices have shrunk. Units of study have been cancelled at the last minute and majors cut mid-way through students' degrees, leaving them unable to graduate.

Some PhD students have had to abandon their theses because their academic supervisors have lost their jobs.

In August, summing up the corporate agenda behind these measures, the corporate consultancy firm EY issued a report that proclaimed in capital letters: "HIGHER EDUCATION IS DEAD. LONG LIVE THE KNOWLEDGE SERVICES SECTOR!" It demanded that both teaching and research at universities be dedicated to the needs of business, propelled by competition from corporate "knowledge services" providers.

This is a bipartisan agenda. Earlier this month Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese said if elected in the next federal election Labor would fund "up to" 20,000 new university places to "fix areas of skills shortages and fill future skills needs." No mention was made of Labor's 2019 election pledge to increase university funding.

That dovetails with the Liberal-National government's "job ready graduates" and other pro-business schemes, the latest of which is to select four universities, based on their "commercialisation readiness" for grants of \$50 million to help "commercialise" research.

As for the NTEU, it assisted the accelerated restructuring by going behind its members' backs at the start of the pandemic to propose a misnamed "national job protection framework" that offered employers 15 percent pay cuts and up to 12,000 job losses.

The national framework was only abandoned after a groundswell of opposition from university staff led management to conclude that the union could not enforce its proposed cuts. There has also been intense opposition to these measures from students who have mounted protests over the sacking of academics and demanded that their education not be sacrificed to meet the needs of big business.

Nevertheless, the NTEU has proceeded to work with individual managements to implement deep job cuts, utilising provisions in union-management enterprise

agreements.

The NTEU and other unions and their pseudo-left supporters falsely claim that a Labor government could be pressured into opposing the measures being imposed. However, Labor has been at the forefront of implementing pro-market “reforms” for decade which are continued in its current policies.

It was the Hawke Labor government that re-introduced student fees in 1987. The Greens-backed Gillard Labor government of 2010–13 carried out the largest cuts to university funding, coupled with tying funding directly to enrolments. The result of this “education revolution” is the reliance of universities on full fee-paying international students.

The Labor Party is again touting itself as the party capable of implementing a new wave of education reforms with the assistance of the unions. In August, shadow education minister Tanya Plibersek proposed to form an “accord” with the Coalition, business, university management and the unions to “reform” universities, essentially along the lines of the EY report.

Political lessons need to be drawn from these bitter experiences. University staff and students need to break from the political establishment parties, the unions and their pseudo-left accomplices and build the only party that fights for free, high-quality education for all, and secure jobs for educators—the Socialist Equality Party.

An important step in this fight is to defeat the anti-democratic electoral laws designed to silence socialist opposition in the working class. We urge all university workers and students: Become an electoral member of the SEP today to assist us retain our party registration and take forward the fight for socialism, and seriously consider becoming a full member of the party to help build a new socialist leadership in the working class on a global scale.



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