

Australia's Labor government to intensify pro-business restructuring of universities

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In the lead-up to the May 21 federal election in Australia the main trade union covering university workers, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), sought to sow illusions that an incoming Greens-backed Labor government would “defend higher education.”

The special May election edition of the NTEU's *Sentry* e-magazine even touted Labor's likely education minister Tanya Plibersek at the top of its list of election candidates rated as “Higher Education Defenders.” Next on the list was Greens leader Adam Bandt, who was pleading for a coalition government with Labor and since the election has committed the Greens to providing “stability” for the Labor government.

The rating of Plibersek and Bandt as “defenders” was on the basis of them signing, along with other Labor, Greens and “progressive independents,” a set of five vague “principles” that commit them to absolutely nothing, and certainly not to reverse the deepening corporate-driven assault on staff and students that saw more than 40,000 jobs eliminated during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This entire “defenders” labelling is a fraud. Plibersek spelt out Labor's agenda last August. She promised a well-heeled gathering at an *Australian Financial Review* Higher Education Conference that a Labor government offered the best means of escalating the business restructuring of tertiary education.

In her speech, Plibersek said not a word about the devastating avalanche of job cuts, let alone commit a Labor government to reinstating any of them. Instead, she echoed the demands of big business, highlighted by a blueprint issued by the EY global consulting giant, which proclaimed the “death” of higher education, demanding an end to universities as they currently

exist, to be replaced by corporate vocational and research services.

As Labor's centrepiece, Plibersek proposed “an Australian universities accord.” It would be a “partnership between universities and staff, unions and business, students and parents, and, ideally, Labor and Liberal—that lays out what we expect from our universities.”

This “accord” would tie university staff and students, via the NTEU and other unions, to a bipartisan front, with the Liberal-National Coalition and university managements, to deliver the profit-generating demands of the capitalist class.

The aim of the partnership would be to “help university reform stick.” A chief “principle” of that “reform” would be “job creation, productivity and our national prosperity.”

That means subordinating university staff and students, even more, to the requirements of employers and the financial elite as a whole. It is in line with the employer-union “summit” being prepared by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government to employ the unions to ramp up “productivity”—output per worker—and suppress working-class opposition.

Plibersek's choice of the word “accord” recalls the Accords struck between the unions and the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983-1996, under which the unions helped inflict a sweeping free-market restructuring of the economy at the expense of workers' jobs and conditions.

Plibersek spoke of boosting “national export income” from the “tens of billions of dollars” that universities generate each year. In other words, universities must intensify their exploitation of high fee-paying international students to offset chronic government underfunding.

As Plibersek boasted, previous Labor governments have led the way in transforming tertiary education from a basic social right, free to all, into a money-making enterprise featuring ever-higher student fees. Labor, she said, “deserves credit for introducing the HECS system,” through which the Hawke government reimposed fees in 1987.

That system became the platform for successive governments, Labor and Coalition alike, to increasingly force universities to become drastically dependent on student fees and corporate revenues. As revealed by the NTEU itself, in an “At the Crossroads” report released on May 2: “Government funding as a proportion of total university revenue has fallen from 80 percent in 1989 to 33 percent in 2019.”

The next Labor government, that of Rudd and Gillard, in which Plibersek was a cabinet minister, imposed a pro-market “education revolution.” It slashed university funding by \$3 billion in 2012-13 and compelled universities to compete with each other for enrolments, particularly in business-oriented courses, in order to survive financially.

For the 2022 election, far from promising to restore the jobs destroyed during the pandemic, Labor only said it would fund “up to” 20,000 extra university places in 2022 and 2023. It dropped its 2019 election pledge, itself puny, to step up university funding by \$10 billion over 10 years.

Moreover, the new student places would focus on vocational areas such as digital and cyber security, manufacturing, early childhood, aged care and disability. These are key priorities for the ruling class as it prepares for a US-led war against China and seeks to maximise the available workforce to exploit.

In line with Labor’s overall election pitch to business, it voted for the Coalition government’s March 29 federal budget, which cut further government funding per university student by 5.4 percent in real terms for 2022-23 and 3.6 percent for the following two years.

The NTEU shares Labor’s pro-business outlook. In its budget media release, it said the Coalition government refused to recognise that “tertiary education is Australia’s fourth largest export industry contributing \$40 billion to Australia’s total exports.” This means further turning tertiary education into a business to serve the profit interests of the Australian

capitalist class.

Together with Labor, the NTEU has made no call for the reversal of the pandemic jobs massacre, which itself was only possible because the union opposed any unified struggle by university workers against it. Indeed, the union worked hand-in-glove with university managements to push through agreements that slashed jobs. That helped them to now post substantial profits, such as the record \$1.05 billion surplus just announced by the University of Sydney.

The ongoing assault on university staff and students can be fought only on the basis of a totally opposed political perspective that rejects the dictates of the financial markets and employers. That is, a socialist program for the complete reorganisation of society in the interests of all, not the soaring wealth accumulation of the billionaires.

That would provide the billions of dollars needed to abolish student fees and establish free, high-quality education, from kindergarten to university, and the basic right of all education workers to secure employment, with decent pay and conditions.

That is the alternative fought for by members of the Socialist Equality Party and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE). For discussion contact the CFPE:

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