

Australian university unions cover up cuts in Labor's budget

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Both the main trade unions covering Australian university workers are trying to conceal the fact that the Albanese Labor government's second budget, handed down last week, intensified years of funding cuts to the country's public universities.

The budget papers reveal that higher education spending will rise in 2023–24 only from \$10.6 billion to \$10.9 billion, or less than 3 percent—a cut of about 4 percent in real terms. That is in line with Labor's first budget, last October, which showed that higher education expenditure would decrease by more than 9 percent in real terms from 2021–22 to 2024–25.

This deepens a \$10 billion cut to university funding over the past decade, starting with the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013 and taken further by the Liberal-National Coalition governments from 2013 to 2022.

As a result, university educators, professional staff and students will face larger class sizes, more exploitation of casual teachers, researchers and administrative workers, and further cost-cutting restructuring at the expense of jobs, conditions and course offerings.

This is part of a broader attack by the Labor government on working-class living conditions and social programs. Buried in the budget papers, and barely reported by the media, are far-reaching cuts to public education, health, housing and disability services that dwarf the small cost-of-living measures.

By contrast, the government has allocated hundreds of billions of dollars for “Stage Three” income tax cuts for the wealthy and military preparations for war against China.

In their responses to last week's budget, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) were either silent on, or sought to play down, the university cuts.

The CPSU positively welcomed the budget, portraying it as a first step toward rebuilding the Australian Public Service (APS), despite only a 6 percent increase in APS jobs. The union said nothing about the ongoing squeeze on universities where it covers increasingly over-worked professional staff.

The NTEU, which covers both academics and professional staff, sent an email to its members claiming that the budget had just “delayed action” on delivering “secure funding.” NTEU president Alison Barnes said the budget had “kicked the can down the road.”

Barnes sought to channel the discontent among university employees behind the illusion that better outcomes would flow from the government's current Universities Accord review. “We will use the time to organise, build power and make sure our vision for higher education is clear in the Accord process,” she wrote.

“If problems such as insecure employment, endemic wage theft and unsustainable workloads aren't addressed they will fester and deteriorate, ultimately compromising the national learning and research effort,” Barnes added.

The reference to the “national learning and research effort” is revealing. It displays the NTEU's agreement with the underlying thrust of the Labor government's Accord project. The review seeks to further restructure the universities to meet the vocational and research demands of the corporate elite.

Labor's terms of reference for the Accord panel call for “alignment” with vocational education to produce the skills required by employers, and stronger research “collaboration between universities and industry to drive greater commercial returns.”

Even the sub-inflationary nominal rise in higher education spending in 2023–24 is, according to the Budget Paper No 1, “largely due” to the funding of 20,000 additional student places, commencing in 2023 and 2024. Labor's first budget last October allocated just \$485.5 million, over four years, to finance these extra places.

These additional places are tied to vocational courses designed to meet employer “skills shortages.” Universities also have to compete for the funding, pitting them even more against each other in a scramble for money tied to business outcomes.

Last week's budget amplified Labor's agenda. It set aside \$128.5 million over the next four years to fund 4,000

additional university places in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines. Education Minister Jason Clare said this would “support the AUKUS program.”

The AUKUS pact with the US and UK governments involves spending hundreds of billions of dollars to acquire long-range nuclear-powered submarines, hypersonic missiles and other hi-tech weaponry for conflict with China and recruiting students to train and work in war industries.

In a budget media release, Clare emphasised the central role that the Labor government is planning for the universities in this war effort. “Universities will be critical to tackling skills shortages, building the future workforce and providing the technical workforce necessary to support Australia’s engagement in AUKUS and develop our sovereign industry capability,” he stated.

This is in line with the “all of nation” mobilisation for military purposes outlined in the government’s recent Defence Strategic Review.

The NTEU is committed to this course as well. In a “budget update” circulated to its members, the NTEU reported the STEM and AUKUS places as one piece of good news for the universities.

To head off the growing disaffection among university workers, the NTEU presented the Accord as an opportunity to have “our voices heard” and “put our sector on a rock-solid footing for decades to come.”

But this Accord is explicitly pro-business. The NTEU is participating in the Accord panel’s “roundtable discussions” on this basis. The union’s submission to the review called for a higher education sector that “provides the graduates with the necessary skill sets for future productivity.”

In a subsequent submission on an Accord discussion paper, the NTEU proposed that the “core mission” of universities included “operating as the engine which turbo-powers the professional job market.”

Far from opposing Labor’s ongoing funding cuts, the latest NTEU submission merely called for a higher inflation indexation formula and a \$500 million higher education fund for “workforce development including converting insecure jobs to ongoing positions.”

Such a fund’s outcomes would depend on the vagaries of the share market, yet the union claimed the fund “could reach \$4.2 billion by 2035 and be making annual investments in the sector of \$150 million.” Even if that occurred, it would be a drop in the bucket because about two-thirds of university workers are on casual or fixed-term contracts.

Moreover, this casualisation is the result of the “education revolution” implemented by the Greens-backed Rudd and Gillard Labor governments. This “demand-driven”

competitive regime forced universities to rely increasingly on casual or fixed-term staff and on milking full-fee paying international students.

While claiming to be fighting casualisation, the NTEU is trying to push through enterprise agreements at universities that offer no guarantees of casuals obtaining secure jobs, inflict further real wage cuts and permit ongoing restructuring. Most recently, the union has sought to sell out a near two-year struggle against management at the University of Sydney.

In their budget responses, the CPSU and NTEU also remained silent on the government’s refusal to provide any relief to students from—let alone abolish—the soaring levels of fee repayment debts under the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP), which was first imposed by the Hawke Labor government in 1989.

To answer these attacks, and Labor’s underlying corporate and military agenda, staff and students need to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the complicit and corporatist unions. These committees would develop and fight for demands based on the educational and financial needs of students and staff, not the dictates of the financial markets, and turn out to broader sections of the working class.

That means a fight against the Labor government and capitalism itself, to reorganise society along genuinely democratic and egalitarian, that is socialist, lines in the interests of humanity, not the corporate ruling class.

This is the perspective advanced by the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators’ network. We do so as part of the worldwide fight to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to provide the means for workers to organise and unify their struggles globally.

To discuss how to form rank-and-file committees, and obtain help to do so, contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

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