

Protests against university staff cuts in New Zealand

Tom Peters
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There is growing opposition to hundreds of job cuts that have been announced at universities across New Zealand. In response to declining enrolments and years of funding cuts by the Labour government, Otago University in Dunedin, Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) and AUT (Auckland University of Technology) have all announced redundancies across multiple departments, affecting academic and non-academic staff.

Last Friday, Prime Minister Chris Hipkins was confronted with student protesters at Otago, where he had been invited by the campus Labour Party club to speak ahead of the party's campaign for the election in October.

Hipkins faced angry questions about the university's announcement that it had to cut "several hundred" jobs to address its financial deficit. One student asked: "We have a \$60 million budget hole, why can't you just fix it?"

The prime minister feigned sympathy for those affected by the cuts but declared that universities had to "rebalance their books," which meant making "difficult" decisions. He washed his hands of the matter, saying "it's not something that we can intervene on as a government. But I would note that we've given the universities, in this year's budget ... the biggest increase in funding that they've had in over 20 years."

In fact, last month's budget slashed funding for universities in real terms: subsidies were lifted by just 5.3 percent, well below the inflation rate of 6.7 percent. This follows an effective funding freeze across the tertiary sector in recent years which, along with a drop in international students, has already led to hundreds of job cuts and attacks on wages and conditions.

The cuts are part of an historic assault on workers'

living standards and social rights—including the right to high-quality, accessible education. Having transferred tens of billions of dollars to the banks and the super-rich over the past three years, Labour is making workers pay for the economic crisis. The state is also redirecting funding to the military as it prepares to join US-led wars against Russia and China.

In addition to an unspecified number of cuts at Otago, VUW has announced it could shed up to 260 full-time equivalent roles (total redundancies, including part-timers, could be higher). This represents more than 10 percent of the university's total staff.

VUW vice-chancellor Nic Smith has blamed a forecast deficit of \$33 million for 2023. Reportedly, 60 academic programs are under review, including public policy, accounting, history, classics, and all languages except Maori.

Last Friday several hundred students and staff attended a protest at VUW called by Students Against Cuts—a coalition that includes the Students Association (VUWSA), Unions Wellington (a trade union umbrella group), the university Labour and Green Party clubs, and the pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation (ISO) and Bolshevik Tendency.

A member of the latter organisation declared that the coalition had "two simple demands: stop all job cuts, and second, make the government foot the bill." The real aim of Students Against Cuts, however, indicated by its composition, is to subordinate students to the union bureaucracy and the Labour-Greens government—thereby preventing any real movement against the cuts.

VUWSA president Jessica Ye said the student union "stands in solidarity with the Tertiary Education Union in the fight against job cuts." Another Bolshevik Tendency speaker declared: "We, the student body,

need to make it completely clear that we are behind the TEU to strike until they win.”

In fact, the TEU has not announced any strike action over the cuts. Over the past decade the union bureaucracy has collaborated in wave after wave of job cuts and pro-corporate restructuring.

During 2020 and 2021, the TEU agreed to wage freezes and hundreds of redundancies as international student numbers fell due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the government refused to increase funding. At VUW, the union’s branch leader, Dougal McNeill, a member of the ISO, declared victory after the university announced 60 so-called “voluntary” redundancies, rather than outright sackings.

The TEU supported Labour in the 2017 election, falsely stating that it offered “a credible and popular alternative” to the former National Party government’s austerity measures. Now, the union and its pseudo-left backers are promoting the illusion that the government can be pressured to reverse the latest cuts.

The ISO’s Brian Roper, an academic at Otago, wrote on May 8 that it was “good to see” the university management joining the TEU to ask the government for more funding. He said Labour “would be politically wise to provide a rescue package.”

Roper admitted that Labour’s record had been “even worse than the National Government that preceded it with respect to chronic underfunding of New Zealand’s universities.” The ISO, however, supported Labour in the 2017 and 2020 elections; it is a fake left organisation which has nothing to do with socialism and has close links with the union bureaucracy and the parliamentary parties.

As for the Green Party, its MP Julie Anne Genter spoke at Friday’s VUW rally, calling on students to “give us more power” in the October election. She declared: “We can afford to invest in tertiary education... [and] support students so they don’t have to live in poverty. We can do all of this when we tax the rich and excess corporate profit.”

This is empty posturing. The Green Party has been part of the Labour-led government since 2017 and supported all its austerity budgets.

The attack on university workers is part of a broader onslaught against the working class. It coincides with a long-running dispute involving more than 50,000 teachers, who confront a union bureaucracy determined

to impose a sellout pay deal. Tens of thousands of healthcare workers face a worsening crisis of understaffing, low pay, and hospitals overwhelmed by the uncontrolled spread of COVID-19 and other diseases.

This situation poses the need for a unified struggle of educators and other workers against the Labour government’s austerity agenda. Such a movement can only be organised in opposition to the Greens, the pseudo-lefts and the pro-capitalist trade unions, which support Labour and are striving to keep the working class divided and paralysed.

The defence of jobs, living standards and public education itself requires the building of new organisations that workers themselves control: rank-and-file workplace committees, independent of the unions and the political establishment.

All the claims by the government that it can’t afford to fund university courses, with well-paid staff, are a fraud and should be rejected. The fight for public education must be based on a socialist perspective to reorganise society to meet the interests of the majority, not the profits of the wealthy few. We call on students and academics to contact us to discuss the way forward.



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