

Meeting: Oppose Australian Labor government's cuts to international students and tertiary education jobs

WSU Rank-and-File Committee
27 August 2024

The rank-and-file committees at Western Sydney University and Macquarie University, and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) are jointly hosting an online forum on Wednesday, September 11 at 7 p.m. to discuss how to fight the Australian Labor government's cuts to international student enrolments and the thousands of job cuts they are triggering across the tertiary education sector. To register click the link:

https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_3-2u5sbnQ1-1FmQwiP8rg

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government has lined up with the right-wing Liberal-National Coalition to slash the number of international student and other migrant arrivals, threatening thousands of jobs throughout the higher education sector.

Education Minister Jason Clare declared yesterday that he had capped foreign student enrolments at 270,000 for 2025—about 53,000 less than this year—with limits set for each individual institution.

Both Labor and the Coalition are engaged in reactionary nationalism, first of all to divert rising social discontent. They are trying to blame international students, like refugees and immigrants more broadly, for the worsening housing and cost-of-living crisis, and deteriorating living conditions affecting millions of working-class households.

This anti-foreigner policy is, at the same time, intended to whip up a war-related atmosphere. Not accidentally, Chinese students are being targeted in particular, amid a growing anti-China witch-hunt by the political and media establishment.

Enrolments will be cut to 145,000 for publicly-funded universities, but the biggest cuts are for those that have by far the greatest number of students from China. Under the guise of trying to shift students to regional universities, the so-called Go8 elite universities, which predominantly attract Chinese students, will have their enrolments slashed from this year by 22,000 or 27 percent.

This also forms part of Labor's plans to halve overseas migration to 235,000 annually for the next three years. In what

amounts to a bipartisan front, Coalition leader Peter Dutton has vowed to cut annual net migration to 160,000, which could reduce student inflows to less than 15,000.

This offensive is already eliminating jobs in universities, as well as private colleges, on top of Labor's deepening of years of systemic underfunding of the universities by Labor and Coalition governments alike.

Among the universities announcing or foreshadowing job cuts, or imposing hiring freezes and non-renewal of employment contracts, are Federation, Tasmania, La Trobe, Wollongong and Sydney. That is just the tip of the iceberg. Many more casual jobs are being eliminated.

Universities Australia, the peak management group, told a Senate committee inquiry this month that 60,000 fewer student visas had been issued in 2023–24 compared to the previous year, costing over 14,000 university jobs—about 7 percent of the total workforce.

Private colleges told the inquiry that they had made up to 40 percent of their staff redundant.

The main campus trade union, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), is intent on keeping educators in the dark. It is covering up the Labor government's role, falsely claiming that the university vice-chancellors are “scare-mongering” about the enrolment cuts as an excuse to slash jobs.

Far from opposing the student cuts, the NTEU has effectively lined up behind them, urging its members to sign a petition asking the government to introduce “phase-in periods for any caps,” supposedly to avoid retrenchments.

In reality, the Albanese government has not waited for the passage of its draconian Education Services for Overseas Students Amendment (Quality and Integrity) Bill, which would give Clare unprecedented powers to cap the enrolments at each of the 1,400 universities and colleges registered to teach international students.

The government has already slashed the intake by more than doubling student visa application fees from \$710 to \$1,600, slowing visa processing and imposing harsher English language requirements and “genuine student” tests.

International students are not to blame for soaring rents and

housing prices! The housing crisis is the result of 13 government-backed mortgage interest rate hikes, the decimation of public housing over the past four decades and the underlying domination of the housing industry by billionaire property developers and profiteering building companies.

Some university and other employers oppose the government's measures because of the impact on their profits. Universities Australia told the Senate inquiry that international students were worth almost \$50 billion in annual revenues last year.

That is the result of the higher education “market” introduced by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013, which forced universities to fight each other for international enrolments, charging exorbitant fees. That led to the sector being rated as the country's fourth largest export earner behind iron ore, gas and coal.

Despite these objections, the Albanese government remains committed to pursuing its cuts for two interconnected reasons.

First, Labor's measures are part of a wider attempt to divert intensifying working-class discontent in a divisive nationalist direction by blaming foreign students and immigrants for the worsening social crisis.

Capitalist governments internationally are all doing the same—from the Biden-Harris administration in the US to the Starmer Labour government in the UK and those across Europe. They are matching the anti-foreigner demagoguery of far-right and fascist parties, such as those of Trump in the US, Le Pen in France and the AfD in Germany.

Second, the enrolment cuts are designed to stoke anti-China sentiment and intensify the pressure on the chronically-underfunded universities to meet the requirements of the Albanese government's war-related Universities Accord blueprint.

The Accord essentially means tying enrolments, as well as research funding, to the vocational demands of employers and the building of a war economy. Funding is to be tied to individual university “mission statements” to satisfy this agenda, which includes military preparations such as the AUKUS nuclear submarines and weapons program, for a US-led war against China.

Labor's first budget, in October 2022, set university funding to decrease by more than 9 percent in real terms from 2021–22 to 2024–25. While starving the universities of funds, the government is pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into military spending and backing the US-armed Israeli genocide in Gaza and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

These developments show how much is at stake at Western Sydney University (WSU). The WSU Rank-and-File Committee is fighting management's plan to restructure WSU College, the university's wholly-owned preparatory college, at the overall cost of nearly 18 educators' and learning coordinators' jobs, or about 10 percent of the total.

The WSU College staff are being forced to compete against

each other in a “spill and fill” process, with absolutely no guarantee that any of them will have a job in the new structure. Students will also suffer from the elimination of courses and the introduction of “block mode” teaching, cramming subjects into four-week periods.

The WSU College staff and students cannot be left to fight this attack alone. It must be defeated, or it will set a precedent across the tertiary education sector. Students, as well as staff, across WSU and throughout the sector must put a stop to this.

The NTEU is trying to block the rank-and-file campaign throughout WSU and other universities for a broader fight to defeat the restructuring and job cuts. In fact, the union struck a deal with management to encourage WSU College educators to apply for redundancy packages.

The NTEU bureaucrats nationally have a long record of suppressing educators' hostility to the increasing corporatisation and militarisation of universities. Again and again, they have pushed through regressive enterprise bargaining agreements with university managements, all designed to facilitate restructuring.

Today, this union apparatus is enforcing the Labor government's anti-immigrant and militarist agenda. It is backing the Universities Accord and blaming university vice-chancellors, not the government, for the job cuts.

Taking a stand for quality education, the defence of jobs and conditions and against the war agenda means rejecting the dictates of management, governments and the corporate elite, as well as the union bureaucrats who enforce their demands.

The September 11 online forum will discuss the need to form rank-and-file committees throughout the education system, totally independent of the union apparatuses, to defend jobs and conditions and oppose Labor's reactionary agenda. To register for the forum, “*Oppose Labor's cuts to international students and tertiary education jobs*”, click this link.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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