

# Students protest against New Zealand budget cuts

Tom Peters  
29 May 2026

Thousands of students protested across New Zealand on May 28 against the right-wing coalition government's austerity budget, released on the same day, which will increase the cost of a university degree by several thousand dollars.

Hundreds rallied in Auckland, Hamilton, Christchurch and Dunedin. In the capital, Wellington, about 650 students marched to parliament.

The budget will end the so-called "fees-free" policy, under which students do not pay tuition fees during the third year of their qualification, up to a value of \$12,000. The government also approved for universities to increase fees by an additional 6 percent next year.

Hundreds of thousands of students, the vast majority, are already forced to go into debt to pay for fees, housing and other costs, typically taking years and even decades to repay their loans. Total student debt at the end of last year was \$16.1 billion, up from \$15.6 billion a year earlier. The median loan balance was \$18,252.

The attack by the National Party-led government comes amid soaring prices for fuel, electricity and food, exacerbated by the disruption of oil and fertilizer supplies due to the illegal US-Israeli war against Iran.

The ruling class is determined to make workers bear the full cost of the economic crisis. As well as attacking students, the budget will increase rent for people in social housing by 20 percent and reduce access to emergency welfare payments. The government will bar most 18- and 19-year-olds from accessing unemployment benefits, under conditions where 15 percent of young people are unemployed. About 8,700 jobs in government departments will be cut.

The National Party also intends to raise the retirement age from 65 to 67 if re-elected in November.

While declaring that it cannot "afford" to fund

superannuation, education and other public services, the government is pouring billions of dollars into the military. The aim is to double military spending from 1 to 2 percent of gross domestic product over the next few years to prepare the country to join US-led imperialist wars.

There is widespread anger and opposition to the deepening austerity measures. Members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at Victoria University of Wellington spoke with several students who marched to parliament and distributed a WSWS article opposing the budget's attacks while warning that Labour did not represent any alternative.

**Kenny**, a psychology student, said Prime Minister Christopher Luxon wanted "to put more money in his own pocket, rather than [supporting] the people of New Zealand. It's all about more money for the rich and less money for the poor.

"I think I'll be about \$16,000 more in debt because of this change. People who struggle with money but still want to get an education, this isn't fair on them," the student said.

Kenny described the doubling of the military budget as "the stupidest thing I've ever heard, because New Zealand barely needs a military." They added that "we shouldn't be supporting a genocide" and should instead support the Palestinian people.

**Weihan**, an English literature and philosophy major, said the budget "will have a huge impact on students. Prices will get way too high for middle class students to afford." This would lead to fewer people undertaking tertiary study. He noted that the government had previously promised to retain the "fees-free" policy for third-year students.

Regarding the increase in military spending, he said, "I don't know why they're going to do that. New

Zealand is far away from wars. We're not about to be invaded." Weihan stated that the country had already started going downhill under the previous Labour Party-led government.

**Evangelia**, a first-year student of midwifery, said: "I'm angry. We're constantly being told by this government that the road to success is through getting degrees, then they do absolutely nothing to support us in that." She would have to pay "thousands more dollars" and would be left with a total of around \$20,000 in debt, which would take "years of my life to pay off."

Speaking about rising unemployment, she said "over the course of last year and this year I've applied for over 130 jobs and I've received three interviews. The job economy, especially for us students, is absolutely abysmal."

Evangelia said that New Zealand should be neutral "and instead of putting money towards the military, put it towards the people. Because whatever money they're putting towards the military they could put to fees-free and they could be bringing in a new generation of doctors, of lawyers, of engineers. But instead they want to go and bomb poor kids in the Middle East."

Outside parliament the rally was addressed by spokespeople from migrant rights organisations and disability advocacy groups, as well as Victoria University of Wellington Students Association (VUWSA), the Council of Trade Unions, the opposition Labour Party and its allies, the Greens and Te P?ti M?ori.

With an election scheduled for November, the protest was essentially a campaign event for these parties.

None of the speakers mentioned the billions of dollars being funneled to the military. Labour and the Public Service Association, the biggest union, openly support this spending, which is aimed at integrating New Zealand into US war plans, especially against China.

Labour MP Jan Tinetti said she was "disgusted" with the budget and noted that the previous Labour government had introduced the "fees-free" policy. In fact, during the 2017 election the Labour Party promised to deliver three years of free education, but this was later reduced to just one year. Labour has made no pledge to restore the fees-free policy if it is elected.

It was a Labour government which introduced the

first tuition fees in 1989, ending what had been free university education. This was part of a sweeping pro-market assault on the working class, which has been deepened by every subsequent government.

Green Party MP Tamatha Paul declared that "tertiary education should be free" with students' living costs also covered by the state. She led the crowd outside parliament in a chant of "Tax the rich!"

These pledges will be discarded the moment the Greens enter another coalition government with Labour. The Greens were part of the 2017–2023 Labour-led government and supported its pro-business budgets, which starved the tertiary sector. Universities and polytechs cut thousands of jobs and reduced course options under Labour, while also driving down wages for lecturers and tutors. The Tertiary Education Union played a key role in preventing any real fight against these cuts.

If a Labour-led government is formed after November's election it will act in the same way as the Labour governments in Australia and Britain, which are imposing drastic austerity measures, tearing up basic democratic rights and militarising their countries for war.



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