

Students in classes

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We spend a lot of our lives in the education system. Over five million people attend a school, technical and further education college (TAFE) or university in Australia, every year. There is a 90 per cent chance that a person here will enrol in a TAFE or university course at some stage during her or his life. In 2003 over 920 000 people were studying at Australian universities alone. Education plays a vital role in reproducing Australia's class divided society. The section below discusses the way the education system produces skilled labour and knowledge necessary for capitalist production. Less obviously, as the following two sections demonstrate, schools and universities also prepare us for class relations at work and are themselves organised along capitalist lines. The place of university students in the class structure and their struggles are the subjects of the final sections.

The production of skills and scientific knowledge

The Australian economy from colonisation until World War II was much more dependent on primary industries like wool, wheat and mining than the USA, Britain and Western Europe. Local manufacturing industry was smaller and less technologically developed than other industrialised countries. Technological innovation was mainly imported from overseas. Most jobs in this low skill economy involved manual labour. The public and Catholic school system reflected this. Education was as much concerned with preparing children for the disciplines of work as with imparting literacy and numeracy. Few people continued their formal education beyond 14 or 15.

From World War II this changed, as the pace of industrialisation and the demand for skilled labour increased. The War and working class struggles that followed it also led governments in developed countries to grant major welfare reforms that built commitment to the war effort and helped maintain political stability. The welfare state needed far more educated labour to formulate policies and administer its new programs.

Key government reports stressed that 'economic growth in Australia is dependent upon a high and advancing level of education'.¹ Post-compulsory school education, then technical education and universities had to be opened up to more children with ability from poorer backgrounds. As late as 1967 only 18.2 per cent of girls and 26.5 per cent of boys reached the final year of school. This improved steadily until by 1992 the rates were 81.4 per cent for girls and 71.9 per cent for boys.² Coupled with the baby boom, the effort to increase school participation rates required serious funding for State Education Departments. In 1975-76 State governments allocated 43.8 per cent of their recurrent spending to education.³ New demands for different kinds of skilled labour and technicians led to changes in schools. Science became a much more central part of the curriculum and expensive science laboratories were built in secondary schools.

Universities were also more closely integrated into national strategies to expand and diversify the economy after the War. The need for an integrated, national approach to research, for example, led to the creation of the Australian National University as a research only institution, in 1946. But the most dramatic change was the increase in the numbers of university students. There were just over 30 000 of them in 1950. Between 1955 and 1975 Australian university enrolments increased by 887 per cent, almost six times the rate of population growth and three times the rate of growth of technical and further education.⁴ Australian universities, like their international counterparts were now expected to produce not only rulers and professionals but also large numbers of lower level functionaries and technologists.

A second phase of expansion of higher education began in the early 1990s. In 1993 there were 576 000 students. A decade later the figure was over 920 000, including many overseas students

paying full fees for education in Australian universities. Neither John Howard's conservative Coalition Government nor its Labor predecessors paid for much of this expansion out of general revenue. Students and their families filled the funding gap, through the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) and full cost-recovery fees. Education Minister Brendan Nelson called for universities to adapt to the changing labour requirements of employers, in light of

a demand for the preparation of 'smart' graduates with multiple and transferable skills and knowledge, suitable for employment in the new economy...Traditional curricula offerings, courses and modes of delivery need to be re-evaluated in light of emerging needs.⁵

Free market economists argue that skills are 'human capital', accumulated in a person. As students can gain private financial returns from their educations they should pay a significant proportion of the costs.⁶ The HECS arrangements mean that when students' incomes reach a threshold level, they start to pay off their education debt through the taxation system. This focus on 'user pays' obscures the fact that the main beneficiaries from education are employers who exploit educated labour power. Yet both the Labor and Coalition governments made substantial cuts in the rate of company tax from the late 1980s. The system of progressive personal income tax generates government revenue from those, including graduates who have gained most from their educations. But, over the same period, governments cut the top rate of personal income tax.

Since the end of the post-war boom, in the mid 1970s, policies for funding education have been shaped by three forces. The state still seeks to ensure that the education system creates a labour force with the skills business needs. One way of dealing with declining profit rates, however, has been to try to reign in state spending and thus taxation that is ultimately a levy on profits. The level of resistance to cutbacks by students has also influenced where the shifting balance between reproducing the labour force and economising on expenditures has been struck. Labor ended free university education but presided over a rapid expansion in the number of university places and expanded funding. The Howard Government made large cuts in university funding, between 1997 and 2000; increased HECS charges and repayment rates; and allowed wealthy Australian students to buy their way into an undergraduate degree ahead of students who had achieved higher marks. But it eventually restored spending on universities. The pattern since the mid 1980s has been one of falling government outlays per university student, more student places and a shift in the burden of funding onto students and graduates. In their efforts to bolster profit rates, by holding down the tax burden on capital, while trying to ensure that sufficient, adequately qualified labour is produced for capitalists to exploit, governments have been trying to manage the contradiction between the relations and forces of production.

In addition to producing workers, universities also generate ideas and knowledge that are useful for government policy makers and business. The development of scientific advances and even of plausible ideologies requires scholarly debate and is enhanced by a liberal tolerance for differences. As a consequence, there may be scope for the employment of some academics who are hostile to capitalism and even for a few radical undergraduate courses.

The reproduction of class

Education does more than produce skilled labour, it also reproduces class relations. It does so by shaping our ideas about society and our emotions. School curricula encourage children to accept society 'as it is'--permeated by competition and structured by inequality--or at least to believe that fundamental change is impossible. Ideologies that serve capitalist interests are accepted as common sense curriculum values. They include propositions like 'success comes through hard work'; it is honourable to sacrifice for the national good; competition is natural; change can only come through gradual reform; and the truth usually lies somewhere between 'extreme positions (the 'golden mean')'. Most schools hold flag-raising ceremonies, sing the national anthem and celebrate ANZAC

Day to inculcate a sense of national pride and belonging. Yet when school students want to hand out anti-war material they are often told off or even disciplined for bringing 'politics' into the school.

The education system does not only promote our acceptance of inequality and exploitation by inculcating the ideologies that justify or disguise them. The *experience* of school, college and university prepares us for the world of work. This is called the 'hidden curriculum'.⁷ In the classroom students have no power and have to follow the orders of their teachers. Subject, in turn, to the workplace discipline of principals and the senior managers in the public or private education systems, teachers may not like what is going on, but feel unable to change things.

Assessment teaches that genuine knowledge and understanding are less important than getting good marks. School results are supposed to reflect our innate abilities. Success or failure at school thus shapes our expectations about the jobs we will enter and the incomes we will earn after school. Assessment rather than aiding the acquisition of skills and knowledge ends up being used as a whip, alienating students from learning. The pursuit of marks at school mirrors and prepares us for the chase after money in the labour market. It also encourages competition amongst students, just as the labour market pits worker against worker. Competing against each other for jobs and money does not benefit workers as a class. They make real gains when they act collectively. Similarly the learning process is enhanced by a focus on co-operation and teamwork rather than the competitive focus on marks.

Schools 'stream' students on the basis of their marks. In the classrooms of those destined for unskilled work there is an emphasis on following rules. These students are given little responsibility and made to do simple, repetitive tasks to prepare them for routine, low wage jobs. The education of students in middle streams emphasises values like dependability and some ability to work independently. They can aspire to skilled and even lower level supervisory jobs. Their chances of promotion will often be enhanced by vocational education qualifications from the TAFE sector. Students designated as academically gifted or talented are encouraged to work more independently and take some form of (guided) control over their school work. After a period of university study, most of them are destined for skilled white collar jobs. Typical university graduates are employed as nurses, teachers, clerks, or technicians. Public and private sector managers--at the highest level, members of the capitalist class-- are increasingly graduates of this stream.

By ranking students, educational institutions also screen them for employers. The specific skills needed for work are often learnt on the job, but high marks, certificates and degrees tell employers that the applicant is disciplined and has the right attitude. Many university graduates end up doing jobs unrelated to their studies. It is not their specific knowledge or skills that count. Their degrees indicate a capacity for analytical thinking, general research skills and some ability to write. Much of the full fee postgraduate coursework market created in the 1990s is driven by employers who regard such qualifications as pointers in making decisions about promotions.

Not all the high achieving students who go to university and even into the capitalist class are the children of the ruling class. This helps justify the profound inequality in Australian society. Inequality, so the argument goes, is inevitable. But the top jobs are or can be open to talent. Anecdotes about bright working class kids who 'make it' through hard work and diligent study supposedly demonstrate that Australia is a meritocracy. Such class mobility does occur but is very much the exception. The Australian education system mainly passes on ruling class privilege from one generation to the next.

Sociological maps of large Australian cities show that wealth, children studying at private schools and high densities of tertiary qualified graduates match up, suburb by suburb. There is a similar correlation between low wealth, children studying at public schools and a low density of tertiary graduates. A 2002 study found that most students at Victorian government schools, after a decade of cutbacks and closures, were unable to gain places in prestigious university courses because their results were not good enough. Almost all the people in these courses came from private schools and a few better funded government schools. Only 11 per cent of students from government schools

received Equivalent National Tertiary Education Rank scores of 90 or more. By contrast 51 per cent of private schools students achieved this score or above. The report described Melbourne University and, to a lesser extent Monash University, as 'private school enclaves'.⁸

The Howard government ruthlessly promoted this cycle of ruling class privilege. Its 2003 formula for education funding gave the minority of students in private schools more Commonwealth money than the majority in public schools. The merit race is rigged--the children of the ruling class start a long way ahead and have a shorter distance to run. ALP leader Mark Latham responded by talking about the need to build a 'ladder of opportunity', especially a fairer education system, so that battlers have the opportunity to improve their living standards through the use of their innate talents and hard work. Changes in the education system alone, however, will not level the playing field between kids from working and capitalist class backgrounds. So long as a minority exploiting class exists--in any case a more fundamental issue than how it is recruited--power and privilege will tend to be inherited by its sons and daughters.

The education system is not only shaped by the ruling class and its interests. Both the teachers and the taught resist. Members of the capitalist class cannot sit in every classroom to oversee what is taught and how students behave. Teachers and lecturers have a certain leeway to add different ideas and perspectives to the required curriculum and to use different teaching styles. But there are limits on what individual teachers can do. If they don't grade their students according to the rules or fail to follow the required curriculum or let kids wander out of the classroom, they can be disciplined or sacked. Popular demands by the working class, such as that for free university education, have been conceded during periods of heightened class struggle.

Degree factories

Like schools or the public service, universities are capitalist workplaces with strict hierarchies of control. They are also increasingly becoming sites of profit-making and capital accumulation in their own right. Australian universities are now significant economic players. The ordinary activities of the University of Melbourne generated an income of over \$1 billion in 2003.⁹ Universities are becoming hybrid institutions with some features that reflect their origins as public institutions and others associated with large private corporations. Some make hefty profits from their commercial activities. In 2001-2 Australian universities earned \$1.9 billion from (non-HECS) student fees, \$459 million from consultancy and contract work and \$208 million from investment income. Property development and English language training courses were also big money spinners. The University of NSW is led the way with a \$257.9 million profit from its commercial activities in 2001-2002, followed by the University of Sydney (\$253.8 million) and the University of Melbourne (\$251.2 million).¹⁰

Members of the ruling class--chancellors and vice-chancellors, business leaders and politicians--have long dominated university councils. Through struggles, students and ordinary academics won token representation on these bodies. Over the last decade there has been a strong push from business and government to streamline the councils into smaller bodies on the model of corporations' boards of directors, by dispensing with potentially dissenting student and staff representatives. According to this model, modern university vice-chancellors are the chief executive officers of large enterprises who link universities to government and industry. While calling for sacrifices from staff and students they and their immediate subordinates look after themselves. Vice-chancellors can receive salary packages of over \$700 000 a year.¹¹ Like their counterparts in other businesses, they compete with each other for funding and enrolments, while pursuing their common class interests in conflicts with their employees over wages and conditions, through the Australian Higher Education Industry Association.

Most of the 84 400 staff employed by universities in 2003 have not shared in the financial windfalls made by universities. For example the ratio of students to academic staff increased from 14.3 to 21.1 over the decade from 1993 to 2003.¹² Higher workloads increased academics' level of stress as

they had to lecture to larger classes, mark more essays and exams and provide more individual advice to students. A 2002 study found that nearly a third of academics were working more than 55 hours a week. Sixty eight per cent reported conflicting work and home commitments. Nearly half were at risk of psychological illness due to workplace stress and pressure, compared to only 19 per cent of the general population.¹³ The casualisation of academic labour also undermined wages, conditions and job security in the 'industry'. Meanwhile, students were redefined as fee paying clients, rather than active participants in the university community. New private universities are competing against public universities for HECS liable and full fee paying students.

Another aspect of the commercialisation of universities is the transformation of intellectual activity into 'intellectual capital'. The first phase focussed on the commodification of universities' research functions. Knowledge, particularly in the scientific or engineering disciplines, was transformed into commercial products that could be bought or sold on the market.¹⁴ Both in the US and Australia, tax laws were adjusted to give generous incentives for corporations to invest in university research. This opened the door for them to profit from the research activities of staff and postgraduates. Universities codified new commercial practices into 'intellectual property policies' and set up 'commercial arms' to cultivate corporate ties, register and market patents. These arrangements tend to socialise the costs or risks associated with producing the knowledge while privatising the benefits.

A second phase of the commercialisation of intellectual activity emerged in the commodification of teaching. Courses are transformed into marketable 'courseware', videos, CD-Roms and web sites. A variant is the development of full fee courses to meet the training needs of specific corporate clients, such as Coles or McDonalds. Macquarie University, for example, has offered advanced diploma courses which mainly consisted of in-house training at McDonalds.¹⁵

Class and students

Before World War II workers generally completed a couple of years of secondary school, at most. Australian universities were about preparing young members of the ruling class to exercise power and training relatively small numbers of doctors, lawyers and clergymen. The best and brightest headed to Oxford and Cambridge, if they wanted academic careers.

University student politics was often right wing and reflected the reactionary attitudes of the Anglo upper middle class. Most professors had patriotic and imperialist outlooks. During World War I, a mob of several hundred Melbourne University students seized a fellow student, Guido Barrachi, and hauled him before a kangaroo court. After his 'trial' they threw him into the university lake. His crime was to have written an article critical of the War at the height of the movement against conscription.¹⁶ Many university students and senior boys from the elite private schools responded to the NSW general strike of 1917 by volunteering to scab. In 1929 students again helped to break a strike, this time of waterside workers.

The picture became more complicated after World War II, as the backgrounds of students became more diverse when a cohort of working class ex-servicemen on scholarships entered the universities. Then the scope for less well off students to attend expanded with the rapid growth of universities from the mid 1950s.

School students do not yet have a place in the relations of production. In the production process of the education system, they are not workers and they certainly are not managers. They are the raw material. Children are oppressed in capitalist societies, thoroughly subordinated to their parents and/or the state. But their dependence on their parents means that, for most purposes, it is through their parents that they experience the class structure. University and TAFE students are outside the relations of production too. But they generally have much greater autonomy from their parents. And, while students from wealthy and middle class families are over-represented in universities, there is no guarantee that they will follow in their parents' footsteps. In addition to their parents'

assets, imponderables, like the state of the labour market and their performance in examinations, will influence their careers.

The disparate origins and destinations of university students means that it is wrong to refer to them as a distinct class or to assign them to their parents' classes. It is their transitional situation that typifies students' position in the class structure.

Students are often quite disappointed that the reality of campus life doesn't meet their expectations. Rather than being part of a community of scholars each student's prospects are mainly determined by her or his background, individual characteristics and performance in exams. Lectures are overcrowded, facilities are often run-down and opportunities for formal small group discussion such as tutorials are limited. Many students don't have adequate financial support from parents or the state to devote themselves to full-time study, even if they are doing a full-time course load. Isolation on campus can reinforce insecurity about the future, resulting from the prospect of long-term indebtedness before tuition charges are paid back, through HECS. Although the discipline is less rigid than at school, decisions about course offerings, course content and fees do not lie in the hands of students.¹⁷

The contradictions between the dominant ideologies that students are expected learn and their own experiences can become acute and they sometimes react with moral outrage. When students have developed a critical interest in politics they have discovered that, beneath a liberal veneer, universities are authoritarian institutions, like corporations and the public service. As recently as the end of the 1970s Australian students could be expelled from teacher training courses for being openly gay.¹⁸ University managers have collaborated with the military and repressive government projects. Thus, in 2004, the Australian National University (ANU) was involved with the British Department for International Development's 'Governorate Capacity Building' project in Iraq, helping to establish an administration favourable to the foreign forces occupying the country. Vice-chancellors have tolerated racism, sexism and homophobia and consorted with heads of dictatorial regimes. Despite professions of tolerance of dissent and critical thinking, they sometimes react to challenges to their power with expulsions, police and the courts.

Indignation at the state of education or the behaviour of universities, corporations and governments can turn into organised political activism and protest movements that challenge university authority, government policies and/or conventional social values. At the same time, student activism tends to be very volatile. After a quiet political period, students have often been the first in society to engage in militant struggles. Then student campaigns can die away as quickly as they initially exploded onto the scene. Even during the high tide of student activism, the early 1970s, the political situation on campuses fluctuated dramatically. The highs of the 1971 anti-Springbok protests and the 1974 wave of campus occupations, for example were separated by two mainly quiet years on most campuses.

The high turnover of students each year, an obstacle to sustaining political traditions, is part of the explanation for this volatility. It also occurs because most students are young and generally do not have long standing political loyalties. They have not had their hopes for a better world crushed out of them by bitter defeats and may throw themselves into campaigns that grip their imaginations.

A relatively small number of confident and determined students can have a large impact on a campus's political climate. Like big factories, university campuses are places where large numbers of people come together for a large part of the day. This creates the possibility for collective mass political action. But, unlike workers, students are not participants in the relations of production. They are not tied to the discipline of the workplace for most of the day. Full time students generally have much more unstructured time that can be used for political activism. If students miss classes to go to a rally they face no sanction, although exams at the end of semester may be more difficult to pass if they miss too many lectures, tutes or labs. If workers miss shifts their pay is docked and they may risk their jobs.

The nature and effectiveness of political action by workers and students therefore differs. A strike where 98 per cent of the workers broke the picket line and went to work would be a flop. The politicised minority needs to patiently win the support of the majority of workers before taking direct action. On the campuses, an outraged minority can take meaningful political action despite the indifference--or sometimes opposition--of the majority. Even at its height, only a minority actively participated in the largest student movement in Australian history, the campaign against the Vietnam war. Most protest organisers today are quite pleased about a rally of 4 000 students, that is two per cent of the student population, in a major capital city like Melbourne or Sydney.

There is another difference between students and workers. Student demonstrations, blockades and occupations can have a political impact. But even large student mobilisations, if they are isolated, can not bring about major social changes. If universities are disrupted it is embarrassing for university managers and perhaps the government, but society hardly grinds to a halt. The implications of concerted action by large numbers of workers are far more threatening to the established order. When workers strike, they can cost employers millions of dollars a day. Widespread strike action can challenge the power of the capitalist class.

While students, as students, are not members of a particular class, many students are also workers. Today the distinction between workers and students is becoming blurred. Students are much more engaged in the casual labour market than a generation ago. In 1984 just under half of full-time university students were engaged in some paid labour during semester. They worked an average of five hours a week. In 2000 more than three quarters of students were engaged in work and they were, on average, working more than three times as long. Full time students are tending to reduce the time they spend on campuses. In the early nineties full timers were spending four or five days a week on campus. Now they are trying to cram all their contact hours into three days to accommodate work rosters.¹⁹ Typical university students today spend as much time working in a call centre or in a restaurant as they spend in classes. As a consequence, more students state that they feel disengaged from university life. Academics also complain that students turn up to lectures and tutorials less and only do the minimum study needed to pass courses rather than seeking to develop a deep, reflective understanding of their subjects.²⁰

An important reason for the increasing amount of the time students spend earning a living is the restriction of government financial assistance to students by both Labor and Coalition Governments. In the 1970s nearly 70 per cent of full-time students were receiving some government financial support.²¹ Only 33 per cent received such support in 1998. By 2001 just 21 per cent of commencing students qualified for Youth Allowance.²²

Students' jobs tend to be casualised, poorly unionised and are often paid cash-in-hand. International students risk deportation if they admit to working more than 20 hours in a week. Many students take late night jobs in hospitality that do not overlap with their classes.²³ Some resort to prostitution. Work in these sorts of jobs is not usually empowering. But campus activists have fought back and occasionally had successes in unionising some workplaces.

In changed circumstances, however, the high proportion of students now engaged in substantial amounts of paid work may actually promote activism. An increase in the level of political struggle in one sector can flow through to the other. A rise in campus activism could quickly flow through to greater confidence among students about organising their often poorly unionised workplaces. Conversely a rise in the confidence of the working class to fight back could quickly affect the campuses.

Student protest

Students have been taking an interest in politics and been forming on-campus political clubs in Australia since the mid 1920s, when the first Labor Clubs were formed. In the 1930s leftwing students opposed the censorship of 'seditious' books by libraries and organised a campus peace

movement to oppose the rise of fascism and the looming war. After the War, many returned servicemen on scholarships joined the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) groups on campus. For several years the CPA was a major force in student politics and the campus left threw itself into opposing the 1951 referendum to ban the Party. While the referendum was defeated the tide on campuses and society at large was turning right.

Campus politics during the 1950s were dominated by anti-communism and a religious revival. There was, nevertheless, organisation on campuses against the White Australia policy following the arrival of students from developing countries, supported by the Colombo Plan. Nineteen sixty four was a turning point. Student campaigners against racism highlighted the plight of Aborigines by conducting a series of freedom rides to expose segregation in rural Australia. In November 1964, the Coalition Government of Robert Menzies announced the introduction of conscription for the war in Vietnam. Many students now had very personal reasons to get involved in politics. The campus left threw itself into the campaign against conscription and initiated the first mass teach-ins to debate whether Australia should be at war with Vietnam. But the bulk of student activists tended to see themselves as a moral force putting pressure on the Government in conventional ways.

Only in 1967 did students begin to engage in militant action against the Vietnam War. They marched on the streets and, in 1968, threw stones at the US consulate in Melbourne. On some campuses, a particularly politicised minority openly collected money for the Vietnamese National Liberation Front and set up campus sanctuaries for draft resisters. These actions were illegal. The authorities often made clumsy and heavy-handed attempts to stop them by expelling or gaoling prominent activists. The campaigns to defend the rights of student protesters drew many more students into mass meetings. Further repression sometimes followed, but, more often, university administrators backed down.²⁴ At Monash University the repression-escalation cycle ran for a couple of years, culminating in 1971, when over 4 000 students blockaded the administration building and armed themselves with stockpiles of rocks to throw at the police. The University Council capitulated and dropped its plans to expel a number of leading campus radicals.

The anti-war stance of campus radicals was initially well in advance of the views of most organised workers. But the students' actions were emboldened by rising levels of industrial struggle over wages and conditions, and in turn demonstrated the effectiveness of militancy. They helped trigger a much more significant challenge to the system. Workers' confidence surged after the mass strike to free gaol union official, Clarrie O'Shea in 1969. The strike turned the Liberal's anti-union legislation into a dead letter and led to an increase in union action against the war. Naval dockyard and meat workers walked off the job when union leader Laurie Carmichael was arrested at an anti-conscription protest later that year. The rising militancy of students and workers made the massive Vietnam Moratorium marches of 1970-1971 possible.

Direct action by student, together with trade union bans disrupted the national tour by the South African Springboks rugby team, in 1971. The games went ahead but were reduced to a farce and an embarrassment for the apartheid regime in South Africa and the Australian Government which supported it. Protestors and flares disrupted play on the fields and the touring team was harassed and black-banned everywhere it went.²⁵ It was the last official visit to Australia by South African sportspeople before the end of apartheid.

After 1971, student activists increasingly turned their attention to changing the campuses. They drew on a culture of optimistic defiance, based on participatory democracy through mass meetings and successful direct action. It did not seem utopian to demand that universities should serve the interests of students, academics and campus workers, and be run by them. At Flinders and other universities, the administrations sought to coopt this mood by creating consultative committees.

Struggles also challenged university curricula and created spaces for alternative philosophy, economics and women's studies courses at Sydney, Macquarie, and ANU. Students attacked traditional assessment practices. In some courses they won group assessment, where tute groups collectively decided on each member's mark. In many there was a shift from a single final

examination to continuous assessment. Another experiment, at Flinders University, gave students the choice of facing a mass university meeting rather than a student conduct board over disciplinary charges. On the most radical campuses (Sydney, ANU, Monash, Macquarie and Flinders) a cycle of student action, management repression and further student action set in again, when the authorities decided that progressive education had gone too far.²⁶

The early stages of the student revolt led to a revival of both the ALP Left and a profusion of short-lived New Left groups that shared a commitment to libertarian politics and direct action. As both the challenge to the system and the repression from the authorities grew, many activists came to the conclusion that they needed to build serious revolutionary organisations. The CPA, linked to the discredited Stalinist regime in the USSR, was not initially an attractive option for most campus activists. The Maoists of the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist), with their illusions in the People's Republic of China, recruited a lot of the most militant activists, particularly in Melbourne and Adelaide. Revolutionary groups inspired by Trotsky's legacy also grew. Student activists were a large proportion of the founders of the groups now known as Resistance, Socialist Alternative and the International Socialist Organisation.

High levels of social conflict, including student but especially workers' struggles, did not mean that capitalism was on its last legs. The continuing long post-war economic boom meant that the ruling class had scope to make significant concessions. After the 1972 election, the new Labor Government brought the last Australian troops back from Vietnam. The Whitlam Government made university education free, introduced a universal health system, established a needs based financial support scheme for students and boosted funding for universities. Vice-chancellors eased up on repression and workers continued to win large pay rises. Revolutionaries found that Labor was able to coopt much of their former audience on campuses. Later, as the post-war economic boom ended, the capitalist class went on the offensive. It dispensed with the Whitlam Government. His successor, Malcolm Fraser, tried to take on the unions. University managers joined in by starting to roll back reforms. Campus radicals found that it was harder to mobilise students to defend earlier gains that were now under attack. For example, at Flinders University the experiments with group assessment and mass disciplinary hearings were rescinded in 1977. After the mid 1970s, a large proportion of student campaigns were defensive, directed against attempts by governments to cut university funding per student and/or to increase fees.

Students were successful in staving off the first attacks on free education. The conservative Fraser Government tried to reintroduce tuition fees for second and postgraduate degrees in 1976. Despite controlling both houses of parliament the Government backed off, after an unprecedented national student strike and the refusal of banks to implement a commercial loans scheme to underwrite students ability to pay the fees. A second attempt by Fraser was thwarted in 1982. But it succeeded in driving the first wedge into free education, in 1979, by introducing a fee for overseas students.

It was the ALP Government of Bob Hawke that ended free education for domestic students. A \$250 'administrative charge' was introduced in 1987, soon replaced by HECS in 1989. Students fought a protracted four year campaign to save free education. Even in the smaller cities, like Adelaide, there were lively rallies of up to 7 000 students which amounted to about 20 per cent of students in the State. Students stormed the trading boards of stock exchanges to highlight their core demand, 'Tax corporations, not students'.

The extension of full cost-recovery postgraduate fees in the mid 1990s led to another high point of student militancy. The proposal to impose a \$9 000 up-front fee for legal workshop students at the ANU in 1994, for example, led to a long campaign, including a nine day occupation of the Chancellery. The administration eventually introduced the fee, although at the lower rate of \$6 000.

The Howard Government's horror budget in 1996 cut back university funding, raised higher HECS charges and allowed students with money but results below the normal cut-off to buy their way into courses. These measures sparked large protests and joint strikes by students and university staff. At Perth's Edith Cowan and Murdoch Universities, staff struck for 36 hours. The campaign's high

point was a demonstration by 10 000 students and staff in Sydney that occupied the Prime Minister's office. But these efforts were ultimately unable to reverse the policy.

The Accord, then unemployment and attacks by the Howard Government undermined working class self-confidence, union density and strike rates (see chapter 4), creating an unfavourable climate for other social movements and resistance by other social groups. From the mid 1990s, students have been prominent in a series of mobilisations that punctuated a period of relatively low levels of social struggle, including the campaign against Pauline Hanson, protests in solidarity with East Timor, the movement against the Jabiluka uranium mine, the blockade of the Melbourne meeting of the World Economic Forum, in September 2000²⁷ and demonstrations outside the concentration camp for refugees at Woomera in 2002.

There is a widespread view that student activism is on its last legs. The argument is that most students are too busy doing paid work to be politically active, hence the generally low level of on-campus opposition to the war in Iraq in 2003. Another factor is the greater bureaucratisation of student politics.

When I was on the SRC (Student Representative Council) at La Trobe in 1974 the only full time officers were the SRC President and the *Rabelais* editor. Today on the major campuses there are five or six times as many student bureaucrats. This gives the bureaucracy a much greater social weight, and if it does not mobilise, as it singularly failed to do around the war, it can have a major dampening effect on the movement.²⁸

Despite these changes, subjective factors such as the politics, the mobilising skills and confidence of both student officials and campus activists are still decisive factors. Thus the actions in 2003-2004 against the HECS deregulation and the other reforms were very uneven. Hundreds of students took part in blockades of administration buildings at Monash and the University of Queensland. A student occupation of the Registry Building at Flinders University forced the administration to delay its plans to debate the introduction of the HECS increases. However, on other campuses the HECS fees were increased by 25 per cent with little more than a symbolic protest. The best results were achieved where daring actions were combined with systematic building work, particularly where full-time student officials have given a strong lead. What is more, very large numbers of students participated in the huge protests against the invasion of Iraq, even if they did not organise against the war on the campuses. While some aspects of campus life have changed since the 1970s, students are still capable of concerted political action in Australia.

Further reading

Armstrong, Mick *1,2,3, what are we fighting for? The Australian student movement from its origins to the 1970s* Socialist Alternative, Melbourne 2001

Bowles, Samuel and Herbert Gintis *Schooling in capitalist america: educational reforms and the contradictions of economic life* Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1976

Hastings, Graham *It can't happen here: a political history of Australian student activism* Empire Times Press, Flinders University, Adelaide 2003, can be ordered from Flinders University Students' Association, www.flinders.edu.au/stuassoc

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Endnotes

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- 6 The principal architect of HECS, Bruce Chapman, provides a summary of the justification for it in 'The Rationale for the Higher Education Contribution Scheme', *Australian universities review* 39 (1), July 1996, pp. 43-50.
- 7 Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis *Schooling in capitalist america: educational reforms and the contradictions of economic life*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1976.
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- 17 Chris Harman *The fire last time: 1968 and after*, Bookmarks, London, 1988, pp. 41-2.
- 18 Graham Hastings *It can't happen here: a political history of Australian student activism*, Empire Times Press, Flinders University, 2003, pp. 151-2.
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- 20 *ibid.* p. 49.
- 21 Bruce Chapman *Austudy: towards a more flexible approach--an options paper*, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1992, p. 46.
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- 24 Hastings, *It can't happen here* op. cit. pp. 18-21.
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- 26 *ibid.* pp. 75-133.
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- 28 Mick Armstrong 'Australian student activism', *Overland* 173, Summer 2003, p. 37.