

bigger fees
less departments

bigger classes
less choices

less staff
less knowledge

Students, the university and the limits of capitalism



Once again, whole departments and their staff (academic and general) and students are under attack at Canterbury – and other universities. The attempt by Canterbury management to abolish American Studies and Film and Theatre Studies, while also wielding the axe against Classics and Art History is an attack on jobs, knowledge and students.

Universities in New Zealand are being turned increasingly into businesses. Just like a sausage factory produces and sells commodities called sausages, universities are being transformed into businesses which sell commodities called 'degrees'.

The university as a business means charging students more in fees, crowding more students into classes, dumbing down courses for sale as commodities, increasing and intensifying the working hours of staff, holding down wages and eroding work conditions in general and cutting courses and departments which may be socially useful but don't generate large amounts of money – all this in order to maximise profits.

The education system in universities is coming to more and more resemble factory-line production.

Why is this happening?

To understand what is going on and why, you need to understand how capitalism works.

In capitalist society, all the goods and services which make the world go round are produced by workers. The value of the goods and services workers produce is greater than the value that they are paid in wages. In other words, the exploitation of workers by bosses results in surplus-value, the basis of profit. This surplus-value – the additional value workers produce but don't get paid for – is divided in several ways.

Part of it is reinvested by employers in their businesses to make more profits. Part of it is consumed by employers in luxury lifestyles. Part of it goes to banks and creditors. A major portion of surplus-value goes

to the government – through taxes on wages and salaries, company taxes and so on. This portion of surplus-value is spent by the government on public services such as health and education and on other areas of the state (the cops, courts, army, etc).

When capitalism enters periods of protracted economic problems, the capitalists attempt to get hold of a greater portion of the surplus-value, since this is the basis of their profits. They try to roll back state spending in areas which are under-written by surplus-value, such as public education and health. They also attempt to privatise parts of the state sector in order to turn them into profit-making enterprises. Capitalists also seek to parasitise off the state sector by getting the state sector to underwrite the private health and education sectors.

What is happening with universities is an attempt to turn these into businesses which make profits, although a big part of those profits still come from state handouts. The more the universities are being transformed into businesses, the more they want to cut staff costs, cut library costs, cut maintenance costs and so on in order to boost profit. Holding down state spending and transforming universities into businesses also means raising fees, pressuring staff to dumb down courses and wiping out “unprofitable” departments and courses. The whole quality of tertiary education comes under attack.

Dumbed-down ‘knowledge’, low horizons and a compliant workforce

Increasingly knowledge is not looked upon as a useful end in itself. Instead, the priority in terms of knowledge becomes driven by and for profit. Rather than fostering deep levels of knowledge acquisition, critical thinking, let alone fostering ideas of human emancipation and the improvement of society, the production of knowledge becomes centred on the principle “Can the university make money from this?” It doesn’t matter how socially useful or important a subject is, it will be wiped out if the university can’t make lots of money out of it.

Students, meanwhile, are referred to as “clients” and “customers” by the university administration, albeit “customers” with less and less choice regarding what bits of knowledge they can purchase.

The university becomes more and more subordinated by the authoritarian demands of capitalist conformity and the authority of the market – to the detriment of students and staff. The university becomes completely complicit with the status quo, dishing up to students the dumbed-down knowledge, low horizons and forms of subjectivity appropriate to slump capitalism and a compliant ‘flexible’ labour force.

Time to rebel

The system and the people running the system can only get away with this as long as we are the passive subjects they want us to be.

We need to start resisting this process. Students and staff need to be organised to fight against staff layoffs, against cutbacks in any area of the university, against the privatisation of university services, against the dumbing-down of our education. We need to fight for quality, free education and make common cause with the working class outside the university – the people whose exploitation is still what pays for most of the costs of education. (For instance, students still only pay about 30 percent of their own education costs; the rest is paid for out of the surplus-value exploited out of workers, most of whom never get the chance to attend university). These days, many students are also working in low-paid, casualised, non-unionised workplaces, being exploited. So it makes even more sense for students and staff to link up with workers right across society, support their struggles and gain their support for our struggles.

Basically, we need to take possession of the university and run it along lines that serve the education and improvement of both ourselves and society in general.

That can only be done in the context of the great mass of people taking possession of the wealth of society and using it for the betterment of society. Given the clapped-out state of contemporary capitalism, which can’t even provide free education anymore, we’ll need a revolution and the building of a new society of, by and for the mass of the people.

This leaflet was produced by the Workers Party on Campus (previously called the Anti-Capitalist Alliance). We stand for a free, liberated university in a free, liberated society. We have regular meetings and film showings at 5pm on Wednesdays in the International Room or the Shelly Common Room.

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And check out the website: www.workersparty.org.nz