

Australian government determined to slash international student numbers despite rejection of enrolment cap bill

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The Albanese Labor government has vowed to keep drastically cutting the number of international students in Australia, regardless of the impending defeat in the Senate of its reactionary bill to impose caps on enrolments at universities across the country.

Labor is intent on outdoing the Liberal-National Coalition opposition in making overseas students, along with immigrants and refugees, scapegoats for the intensifying cost-of-living, housing and social crisis affecting millions of working-class households.

The Coalition announced on Monday that it would join the Greens in voting in the Senate against Labor's signature plan to cut migration numbers by slashing international student enrolments. Labor's response was to demagogically accuse the Coalition of being "soft" on the anti-immigrant witch hunt.

Education Minister Jason Clare told reporters on Monday that the Coalition's decision to block the bill would destroy opposition leader Peter Dutton's credibility on migration. "You can't talk tough on immigration and then go soft on this," Clare said.

Clare vowed to continue cutting international student numbers by denying them visas through the government's December 2023 directive known as Ministerial Direction 107, supposedly designed to block "high-risk" students coming to live in Australia.

Under this regime, the Labor government also more than doubled non-refundable student visa application fees from \$710 to \$1,600—the highest in the world—slowed visa processing and imposed harsher English language requirements and "genuine student" tests.

These measures have already cut the student arrival numbers from 577,295 in 2022-23 to 376,731 in 2023-24, and led to more than 60,000 visa refusals so far in 2024. This has triggered thousands of job cuts in universities and private education colleges.

The attack on international students forms part of Labor's

plans to halve overseas migration to 235,000 annually for the next three years. The Coalition has vowed to cut annual net migration even further, to 160,000, which could reduce annual international student inflows to less than 15,000.

Both parties are ramping up their anti-immigrant agitation, seeking to divert in a poisonous nationalist direction the growing working-class hostility to the devastation of living conditions. The ruling classes globally are on the same path, now spearheaded by US president-elect Donald Trump's pledge to mobilise the military to deport millions of immigrants.

Coalition shadow finance minister Jane Hume accused Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government of "opening floodgates to record levels of international students" and claimed that this had exacerbated rental shortages in inner city areas.

In truth, international students make up only 4 percent of the rental market, yet rents have soared, as have home mortgage repayments, due to a combination of billionaire property developer profiteering and government-backed interest rate hikes to try to suppress workers' wage demands.

Under Labor's enrolment cap plan, 15 universities were to have had their numbers reduced for 2025, particularly targeting those with the highest numbers of Chinese students. Across the country, enrolments were to be cut overall by more than 50,000, to 145,000, for publicly-funded universities, with severely damaging consequences.

Labor is also continuing to starve the universities of adequate funding, exacerbating the crisis produced by their ever-greater reliance on exorbitant international students' fees because of years of funding cuts by successive Labor and Coalition governments.

Those fees and the flow-on effects of student spending on housing and other services have become a \$51 billion-a-year revenue-earning industry for Australian capitalism, making it the ruling class's fourth-highest export earner after iron

ore, coal and gas.

International students have been treated as cash cows as a direct result of the education “revolution” imposed by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013. This “revolution” created a corporate-style market, which forced universities to fight each other for full fee-paying international enrolments.

The bill’s rejection, just weeks before the start of 2025, has now thrown the country’s 39 public universities into chaos. While the bill was still pending, some proceeded with 2025 enrolments, while others paused international student applications and established waiting lists to avoid going over the caps that the Albanese government had announced.

In October alone, universities announced more than 1,000 job losses, while others resorted to staffing freezes and/or the decimation of contract and casual staff, especially in the humanities and arts. Those cutting hundreds of jobs included the Australian National University, the University of Canberra, James Cook University, the University of Southern Queensland and the University of Wollongong.

Greens education spokeswoman Senator Mehreen Faruqi described the rejection of the Labor government’s bill as “a big win for the tertiary education sector” and international students. In reality, the assault will continue.

Faruqi also underscored the Greens’ hopes of propping up the Labor government after the next election, due by May. Since barely scraping into office in 2022, Labor’s support has further disintegrated among workers and youth because of the gutting of living standards and its backing for the US-armed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Faruqi told the media: “We know there is a very good chance that there will be a minority government, with the Greens in balance of power or having influence in that minority government, we can actually push Labor to be better and to support the tertiary education sector.”

This flies in the face of the historical record. The Greens formed a de facto coalition with the last minority Labor government, that of Julia Gillard from 2010 to 2013, as it slashed university funding, cut welfare entitlements and joined the Obama administration’s military and strategic “pivot to Asia” to confront China.

Today, the cuts to international students are also aimed at forcing the chronically under-funded universities to integrate themselves more fully with the demands of big business and the military, as set out earlier this year in the Albanese government’s Universities Accord.

The Accord insists that universities must reshape both their teaching and research in partnership with employers, and in line with the building of a war economy, including through the AUKUS pact, in preparation for a US-led war against China.

While starving the universities of funds, the government is pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into AUKUS military spending, as well as backing the Zionist barbarism in Gaza and Lebanon and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

The main campus trade unions, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), have been complicit in Labor’s assault. In September the NTEU asked its members to sign a petition to the government calling for “phase-in periods for any caps” on international students, not the reversal of them.

The NTEU falsely claimed that the enrolment cuts could be implemented without any job losses and that vice chancellors’ warnings about thousands of job cuts were just “scare mongering.”

At a public online forum organised by the rank-and-file committees at Western Sydney and Macquarie universities, and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), an important resolution was passed opposing Labor’s cuts to international students, condemning the facilitating role of the unions and calling on workers to take matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees.

The motion opposed the poisonous nationalism of both Labor and the Coalition. It defended the basic rights of workers and young people to live, work and study wherever they choose. “This is essential to forge an international movement against war and austerity and the underlying capitalist profit system itself,” it stated.

The resolution called for “a unified campaign by educators and students, and workers and youth more broadly, to fight the Albanese government’s cuts to international student enrolments and the thousands of job cuts they are triggering across the tertiary education sector.”

If you agree with this call, please contact the Committee for Public Education, the educators’ rank-and-file network, to discuss how to form rank-and-file committees and obtain help to do so:

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact