Unions warn TISA trade agreement threatens integrity of Australia's education system



Australian education unions are jointly calling on the Federal Government to ensure that public education is protected from measures in the international Trade in Services Agreement (TiSA) due to concerns the proposed trade deal will seriously diminish the integrity of Australia's education system.

Australian Education Union (AEU) Federal President Correna Haythorpe, National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) National President Jeannie Rea, and Independent Education Union (IEU) Federal Secretary Chris Watt, have jointly written to Trade and Investment Minister Steven Ciobo urging the Federal Government to push for education to be exempted from the TiSA negotiations.

The unions – which represent more than 250,000 teachers, academics and professional staff working in schools, colleges, universities, early childhood and vocational education settings – share concerns the negotiations put Australia's control over its education systems at risk by allowing foreign multinationals to challenge government decisions.

NTEU National President Jeannie Rea said the TiSA agreement could fundamentally limit Australia's power to protect and preserve the quality of its education systems.

"TiSA is a wide-ranging agreement which has the potential to prevent government from discriminating between public and private sector providers in relation to access to public education subsidies, and prohibits governments from reversing privatisation once it has started," Ms Rea said.

"This severely limits our governments' ability to regulate for the public good.

"As Australia's national education unions, we are concerned about the absence of a comprehensive education 'carve-out' in the TiSA, which means the sector will be exposed to greater privatisation and commercialisation, and fee-free, high-quality public education will be threatened."

AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe said that Australia's strong traditions of access to quality public education could be under threat.

“The proposed exemptions are not strong enough. We need to ensure that education is fully protected,” said Ms Haythorpe.

“In Australia we already know from the crisis in the VET sector what happens when governments fail to adequately regulate the entry of private providers into vocational training and the enormous damage done to students, communities and the integrity of VET qualifications. The TiSA agreement may make it harder for governments to act to prevent or amend similar disasters.”

Independent Education Union Federal Secretary Chris Watt said the unions were insisting on the immediate introduction of legislative reforms to Australia’s treaty-making system that bring accountability and transparency to Australia’s international trade agreement process.

“Existing and future Australian governments, from the Commonwealth government to local councils, must be able to regulate across the education sector, from kindergartens to schools, from TAFEs to universities; whether these institutions are public or private, for-profit or not for-profit, on campus or online,” said Mr Watt.

The unions have formally requested that the Federal Government act in the public interest to protect the provision of public education across the sectors in Australia by seeking an explicit carve-out of public education from the TiSA.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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