Unions call on government to protect education in trade negotiations

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Australian Education Union (AEU) are challenging the Australian Government to come clean on its position in the secret TISA negotiations, now at a crucial stage.

The NTEU is accusing the Abbott Government of using the international Trade in Services Agreement negotiations to covertly open up government subsidies to international profit making higher education providers.

“Twice the Australian Senate has rejected legislation to deregulate university tuition fees, cut funding to public universities and extend CSPs (Commonwealth Supported Places) to private higher education providers. The government must give the Australian Parliament and public the assurance that it does not intend to let this slip through in the wording on „public subsidies? in the TISA”, said NTEU National President, Jeannie Rea.

“The NTEU supports a clearer definition of public services which retains the right of governments to provide and fund public services without being obliged to provide subsidies to private providers,” explained Rea.

The AEU and NTEU are gravely concerned about reports that the Australian Government, along with the governments of Colombia, New Zealand and Norway, is proposing the inclusion of education within the scope of the international Trade in Services Agreement.

The two unions, representing teachers, academics and other workers in schools, TAFE and universities, oppose trade agreements which liberalise and further commercialise and privatise education.

The purpose of the TISA negotiations, which are being conducted in secret by members of the World Trade Organisation, is to further liberalise trade in services across the world .The final details of any agreement struck will not be disclosed until 5 years after it is signed.

“Australians should be concerned about the threat posed to public education in these secret negotiations and alarmed by the lack of transparency,” said AEU Federal President, Correna Haythorpe.

“Education is a right, not a commodity, and accessible public education must continue to be provided by governments. Australia must not put its world-class public education system at risk simply for the convenience of global corporations. “The liberalisation of education and facilitation of the private education market, as a consequence of including education in the TISA, would have negative consequences for public education.

“We have seen the huge damage done in the VET sector by uncontrolled privatisation. We do not want this secret agreement to extend this damage,” added Haythorpe. The two unions argue that restricting the capacity of governments to regulate the provision of education in their national interests poses a direct threat to quality public education for all, potentially impacting on student learning conditions and the working conditions of teachers, academics and other education workers. It is also a direct challenge to democratic processes and the public governance of education, claim the two unions.

“Across the world we are seeing strong pressure to commercialise and corporatise education. In Australia we have seen the huge damage done by the privatisation of vocational training, but we are also heartened by the widespread public opposition to the federal government?s current agenda of higher education deregulation and privatisation,” stated Jeannie Rea.

“Putting our education systems up for negotiation in secret is not acceptable. We need stronger protections and investment in public education, not a watering down of regulation and accountability,” emphasised Correna Haythorpe.

“Public education must remain at the heart of the Australian education system because it is the only way to ensure that quality education is available to all,” concluded Haythorpe.

The AEU and NTEU are calling on the Australian Government to join with countries such as Mexico, Switzerland, Korea, Taiwan and Japan, which have all opposed the inclusion of education in the TISA.

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