

A reply to a radical activist in New Zealand

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Between mid-May and late July, New Zealand university students held a number of protests over the deepening crisis in the country's tertiary education system. Sharp funding cutbacks initiated by previous governments, and continued by the current Labour-Alliance coalition, have resulted in rising fees and ballooning student debt, institutions falling into the red, unprecedented course cutbacks and staff reductions, and a reversal in the ability of working class students to access higher education.

At the opening of the student campaign, the World Socialist Web Site commented on the significance of the emerging opposition by students to the attacks on state education, but warned that if this movement was to avoid demoralisation and defeat, students would need to break with the perspective of protest politics and turn to the working class on the basis of a socialist program.

The comment prompted a critical reply by Joe Carolan, a leader of the "Fightback" student group that organised the protests (Link to letter below). In his letter to the World Socialist Web Site, Carolan argues that the student "Fightback" campaign has been gaining support because it is not led by "doctrinaire" socialists, whom he characterises as being "not outward looking". He accuses the WSW of "misunderstanding the dynamic" of the student campaign and of failing to grasp the significance of its orientation towards the trade unions and social reformist parties.

Carolan's letter is important because it provides an opportunity to clarify the gulf between Marxism and radical activism.

A fresh round of student protests has begun in New Zealand just eight months after the installation of a new Labor-led government. The Fightback student protest movement organised the recent campaign, claiming to be opposed to the government's policies. However, it is significant that in his letter to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Fightback leader Joe Carolan never addresses what the source of the crisis in education is. And this is no oversight. It allows him to advance a definite political agenda—pressuring the Labour government through protests—without having to articulate and defend the conceptions on which that agenda is based. One is supposed to take at face value that the cuts are simply the product of the proclivities of this Labor government and the National government that preceded it.

But the protracted assault on public education in New Zealand is intimately bound up with a pro-market offensive against the working class, which has been unleashed all over the world during the past two decades.

Education "reforms"—increasing privatisation, "user-pays" systems, funding cuts—are being introduced by governments in every country and of all stripes, driven by the demands of the financial markets that costs be reduced and "international competitiveness" enforced.

All of the educational "initiatives" imposed by New Zealand governments from the mid-1980's onwards, including competition between institutions, the introduction of fees, the entrenchment of private sector management models and sponsorships, staff cuts and pay freezes, have profoundly structural and systemic roots in the capitalist profit system itself. Governments either comply with the new requirements of capital, as Prime Minister Clark's six-month old Labour-Alliance regime

is now doing, or they are dealt with accordingly.

The political organisations that Carolan seeks to pressure are the very ones implementing the cuts. In the two months since the student campaign began, Massey University has announced an unprecedented attack on academic staff jobs, with a proposal to sack 86 teachers, while Victoria University has announced that, facing an \$11 million debt, it will shut down courses and departments and embark on a similar job-cutting program. Moreover, the University Staff Association has been forced to acknowledge that, under the present government, the current wave of sackings is the most severe in the history of tertiary education. Meanwhile, a report issued just weeks ago by the Auditor-General reveals that with current policies intact, student debt will blow out to over \$20 billion within two decades. Among the present generation of students, there will be many who will live their lives in debt, dying without having paid off their student loans.

The fact is, despite Carolan's very limited "success" in mobilising students in a few protest activities, the Clark-Anderton government has fallen quickly into line with the dictates of the markets, and totally ignored the demands of the Fightback group. The student leadership's initial threats to organise escalating protests, including a national "day of action" on July 26 and simultaneous occupations of university administration buildings, involving thousands of students, have come to nothing. Indeed, in failing to mount any principled opposition to the present tertiary education cuts and the government that is administering them, the student movement has, along with the academic staff union, left staff and students completely disarmed in the face of the latest offensive.

This will not be the first "fightback" campaign to fizzle out. There were several throughout the 1980s and 90s, in both Australia and New Zealand. With each fresh influx of students, the same tired rhetoric was wheeled out by the student leaders and radical outfits. Protests and occupations were organised, only to be progressively wound down, with the help of the trade unions and Labor parties. Sooner or later, the students involved withdrew to join the ranks of the politically demoralised.

The more thoughtful students need to begin considering the causes of such repeated failures.

Carolan parades himself as a "socialist", his name currently promoted on the Socialist Workers Organisation website as "Joe Carolan a.k.a. The Rebel". Yet an analysis of the politics presented in his letter proves the opposite. He regards as "doctrinaire" the conception that the defence of public education necessitates a program aimed at mobilising the working class for the conquest of political power and the complete transformation of society along socialist lines.

Carolan writes: "We are also raising the arguments for a wider, socialist solution to poverty, low wages, racism and sexism that affect so many young people, both on and off campus." What these "arguments" may be, and what he considers as a "socialist solution" remains a mystery. Nothing further is elaborated. Socialism, it appears, is simply an optional "add-on" to a list of reformist demands. He goes on to condemn the "doctrinaire" socialists for not building anything "comparable" to Fightback. Carolan essentially subscribes to the century-old argument that reformists have habitually directed at revolutionists, namely, that they are

uninterested in the day-to-day struggle to defend basic rights, and are only concerned with the “socialist revolution”, in some dim, distant future.

But this is false to the core. Any examination of the past century reveals that whatever gains were made were byproducts of major political and social struggles of the working class, struggles that were led by socialists against the existing opportunist leaderships. As Rosa Luxemburg pointed out 100 years ago, in her brilliant pamphlet *Reform or Revolution*: “Work for reform does not contain its own force, independent from revolution. During every historic period, work for reforms is carried on only in the direction given to it by the impetus of the last revolution, and continues as long as the impulsion of the last revolution continues to make itself felt.”[1]

In the most fundamental sense, the reforms granted by the bourgeoisie in the period following World War II were a response, firstly, to the socialist revolution carried out in Russia in 1917, and secondly, to the threat of revolution posed by the sustained upsurge of the working class and oppressed masses internationally in the mid- to late-1940s.

The very success of the ruling classes in prosecuting their offensive during the past 20 years, including the assault on public education, has been directly bound up with the absence of any politically conscious movement in the working class. The socialist conceptions that animated large sections of workers in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution were progressively compromised and destroyed through the combined agencies of Stalinism, labor reformism and trade unionism—all of which attacked genuine socialism and its central axis, internationalism.

In opposing a socialist program, what does Carolan advance? As his letter makes explicit, he resurrects the key plank of the radical protest movements of the 1960's and 70's—the slogan of “student power”. Contained here is the conception that students alone, by virtue of their militancy and determination, are capable of fundamentally changing society—or, at the very least, of confronting and defeating government attacks.

It is instructive to review what actually happened in the 60s and 70s. First and foremost, the student protest movement against the Vietnam War did not emerge in a vacuum. It was one expression of the growing radicalisation and politicisation within the working class itself. Between 1968 and 1974 workers internationally embarked on a wave of struggles that threatened the very basis of capitalist rule: the 1968 general strike in France, the “Prague Spring” mass movement against the Stalinist regime in Czechoslovakia, the industrial struggles and urban riots in the US, Italy's “hot autumn of 1969”, the overthrow of the Tory government in Britain by the miners, the collapse of fascist dictatorships in Portugal and Greece, the uprisings of workers in Latin America, etc. The key question for students was to turn to the working class and arm this militant movement with a conscious socialist orientation.

Moreover, the demand for “student power” was advanced by the various middle class radical tendencies as a means of avoiding any political struggle against the treacherous role being played by the Stalinist Communist parties, Labour parties and trade unions within the working class. The prevailing politics of the radical groups encouraged young people to write-off the working class as the key social force in the social revolution and to substitute instead petty bourgeois elements, such as students or the peasantry.

What was the outcome? The protest movement disintegrated as the Stalinists, social democrats and trade unions betrayed the working class, allowing a certain restabilisation of capitalist rule. The result has been two decades of a sustained offensive by capital and all its agencies against workers' wages, jobs and living standards, and the progressive dismantling of social rights, such as free universal tertiary education, won over an entire previous historical period. In Australia and New Zealand, the Labour parties launched the assault, in close collaboration with the unions.

Today's “Fightback” leaders seek to cover up these experiences, in order

to push an agenda that has already been thoroughly tested out. What, for example, is the perspective guiding Carolan's proposed occupations of the “financial centres of all NZ campuses”? To force the government to reverse its pro-market strategy? Could they possibly succeed in this, isolated from any wider social and political struggle in the working class? And what should students make of Carolan's assertion that “we do not look to the Labour/Alliance MPs or trade union bureaucrats to do anything”? What then, one may ask, are Fightback's goals? Radical activity simply for its own sake?

The fact is that the student movement, led by organisations such as Fightback, which is, in turn, closely aligned with “radical” groups such as the Socialist Workers Organisation, has come to a dead-end after a decade of fruitless activity trying to pressurise this or that agency of capitalism to solve the burgeoning problems of students.

Fightback's most recent demands include free education for all through the raising of taxes on the wealthy; the provision of living allowances and the scrapping of student debts; an end to the privatisation of tertiary education; and adequate government funding for all educational institutions and research. But the essential political question remains—how can these aims be realised when all governments, including New Zealand's, are being directed by international financiers, banks and corporate executives to continuously cut taxes, reduce social spending and thereby facilitate the flow of foreign investment capital? The implementation of any one of these measures would require far-reaching economic, political and social changes at the most fundamental level.

The “Fightback” campaign has no more intention than its predecessors of fighting for such changes. This is revealed by its “united front” strategy. What Carolan presents as a method for politically exposing the leaderships of the established reformist parties—by placing “concrete” demands on them, which will bring them into conflict with students and with rank-and-file members—is in fact the opposite.

In his letter Carolan boasts that “local Alliance councillors have come in to support our occupations in the Waikato University.” Further, in a press statement issued on May 31, Fightback Waikato offers an enthusiastic report of a rally in Hamilton addressed by Alliance city councillor Dave MacPherson. The Alliance, formed in 1989 by Jim Anderton as a “left” safety valve for disenchanted Labour voters, is now a coalition partner with the Labour party in the new government.

In MacPherson's speech, which Fightback refers to approvingly, he demagogically calls for “grassroots pressure” as “the only way to shift this government”. But “Councillor Dave”, as Fightback endearingly calls him, is a leading figure within the Alliance, having been a full-time organiser and twice parliamentary candidate as well as a city councillor. Not only was MacPherson allowed to participate in the student rally unchallenged about his own party's policies, he was actively promoted by the “Fightback” leadership as having “consistently supported the fight for Free Education” and identified as a radical sympathiser because he had visited an earlier student occupation at Waikato University.

MacPherson's relationship with Fightback underscores the purpose for which the Alliance was established—to divert the struggles of working people over living standards into safe channels, while all the time posturing as a “left-wing” alternative. The division of labour is this: while the Labour majority carries on with its big business agenda, its coalition partners in the Alliance and Greens, especially their lower level members, make disapproving “left” noises. Far from “exposing” the political character of the Alliance, the “Fightback” campaign actively promotes it.

Similar issues emerge in Carolan's defence of the unions. He claims that the WSWs, in warning students about the unions' role, is setting out to “miserabilise” the unions as a whole, when the problem is merely one of their “sad and timid” leadership.

But the failure of the unions to defend any of the economic or social gains of the working class over the past two decades is not simply a

product of the mistaken policies or spinelessness of particular leaders. Rather, it expresses the historical dead-end of the political program of trade unionism itself, which has its foundations in the acceptance of the wages system and the social relations of capitalism. If the past betrayals and defeats of the working class can be attributed to the personal characteristics of its leaders, how does Carolan explain that exactly the same phenomenon has occurred, without exception, in every union, in every corner of the globe, regardless of the political persuasion of the union leaders involved or the combativity of their members?

Just as every other organisation based on the perspective of national reformism has been pitchforked into terminal crisis by the advent of globalised production, so have the unions. The essential contradiction on which the trade unions have foundered has been succinctly explained by David North, chairman of the WSWs Editorial Board:

“Standing on the basis of capitalist production relations, the trade unions are, by their very nature, compelled to adopt an essentially hostile attitude toward the class struggle. Directing their efforts toward securing agreements with employers that fix the price of labor-power and determine the general conditions in which surplus-value will be pumped out of workers, the trade unions are obliged to guarantee that their members supply labor-power in accordance with the terms of the negotiated contract. As Gramsci noted, ‘The union represents legality, and must aim to make its members respect that legality’.

“The defense of legality means the suppression of the class struggle, which, in the very nature of things, means that the trade unions ultimately undermine their ability to achieve even the limited aims to which they are officially dedicated.” [2]

While workers are abandoning the unions *en masse*, the radical groups—whose nationalist outlook dovetails completely with that of the unions—is trying desperately to revive them. In turning to the unions, the student leadership is orienting, not to the working class, but to the union bureaucracy. A genuine turn to the working class requires a resolute and intransigent political struggle against the influence of the bureaucracy, to rigorously expose its political role and agenda before the eyes of working people.

It is to this task that the *World Socialist Web Site* is committed. The experiences of the past two decades, let alone the last 100 years, demonstrate that there is no quick or easy solution. To meet the offensive of capital, a conscious political movement of the working class must be developed, capable of challenging the very basis of the profit system itself. And this movement must be armed with a scientific socialist perspective, firmly rooted in an assimilation of the strategic experiences of the twentieth century.

We encourage all students to make a thorough study of the analysis presented by the WSWs and begin to draw the necessary political conclusions.

Notes:

1. Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution*, Pathfinder, 1988, p 49
2. David North, *Marxism and the Trade Unions*, Mehring Books, 1998, pp 13-14.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact