Melbourne, Australia

Thousands of students leave school to attend antiwar protest

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Up to 4,000 students marched yesterday in Melbourne in the Australian state of Victoria as part of the international student strikes against the US plans for war on Iraq. The majority were high school students, some as young as 13, and they came from at least 65 different schools—government and private, including Anglican and Catholic colleges.

Large contingents came from Shelford Girls Grammar, Melbourne Girls College, Victorian College of the Arts Secondary College and Presentation Convent Windsor. There were also students from several schools in the city's northern working class suburbs, including Penola College, Viewbank Secondary College and Northcote High School.

Some students participated with the approval of school authorities and the support of their parents. At Melbourne Girls College, teachers had encouraged debates in class prior to the march and a contingent of over 100 students marched in the demonstration.

The young demonstrators were lively, enthusiastic and adamant in their opposition to war. Homemade banners displaying antiwar and peace signs dotted the crowd when the marchers converged at the State Library.

The speakers' platform included union leaders, representatives of women's groups and the Australian Democrats, all of whom promoted the illusion that pressure could be brought to bear through the official channels to halt a US invasion of Iraq.

In the generally festive atmosphere, every speaker received a round of applause. But the loudest cheers came for those who referred to the international scope of the protests and voiced the prevailing mood that there should be no war under any circumstances. Victorian Trades Hall Council secretary Leigh Hubbard, for instance, received a roar of support when he declared that he opposed the "slaughter of the Iraqi people whether or not it is sanctioned by the UN Security Council."

The protestors marched from the State Library to the state parliament building where an open forum was held on the steps. A number of students took the opportunity to indicate where they were from and express, in brief pointed statements, their hostility to the war. Two international students—one from Israel and the other from Italy—received applause when they condemned the Howard and Bush governments.

WSWS correspondents spoke to a number of the students. Martin, Eliza and Emily, from the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) Secondary College, explained that they had participated in the rally in Melbourne on February 14, which attracted around 200,000 people. "About 50 came from VCA, we came in a whole group," Eliza said.

Martin said he had heard a news report about Hussein Kamel, a high-ranking Iraqi defector who revealed in 1995 that Iraq had destroyed its nuclear, chemical and biological capacities. "Bush and Howard have no proof and they are still claiming they are there looking for weapons," he said. "Bush is going to war for oil. I can't really believe this is about terrorism or weapons of mass destruction."

Moin Haroon, a recently-arrived telecommunications student from Pakistan, commented: "I am here because this war will destroy millions of lives whilst the superpowers advance their own interests—it is not acceptable at all. It has nothing to do with terrorism but [it is about] minerals and oil. The US has now

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developed a new type of colonialism to suit their interests.

"The US is forcing the Pakistani government to cross its limits to support this so-called war on terrorism. If it doesn't agree, it could be the next target. The USA wants to get into this whole region—they are threatening the sovereignty of countries. It's just not acceptable. So many students I have spoken to are so angry about this war—it is completely unjust." He took a number of WSWS statements to distribute.

Stephanie Kyriakopoulos, 14, came with fellow students from Northcote High School who brought their own banners. "There was a lot of discussion at our school to attend this protest including encouragement from our teachers. We don't want a war against the innocent people of Iraq. The US and Australian government want to spill blood for money."

A large contingent of about 100 students came from Melbourne Girls College. Amber Evangelista, 14, said: "There have been so many wars before but we just don't learn. What destruction will this war cause? It's horrible that the US wants this even though so many people are against it. But it's worse when the Australian government tries to tell us it's for a good cause. Eighty percent of those who will die in this war will be women and children."

Lucy Groan O'Connor commented: "The US trained Osama bin Laden and then they try to kill him. The same with Saddam Hussein. They just turn on anyone to throw in a puppet government of their choice. This is John Howard's war, not ours—we don't agree with it. When you're a government, you're supposed to listen to people, have a democracy—but they do the opposite. Bush says he's for democracy and that's why they are attacking Iraq—they wouldn't care less about what Americans think."

Nilima Pelz attende with her son, and another friend's son from Blackburn High School. She felt very strongly about students having their own voice against the war.

"This war is completely wrong—it is a terrorist attack against the Iraqi people. The US picks and chooses the countries to attack—it has nothing to do with terrorism. Who brought Hussein to power in the first place? It was the US. Now they want to remove him and replace him with some other puppet government.

"The US is hypocritical in its foreign policy. They don't have to listen to the UN or follow its resolutions, but everyone else has to—if not, they become the next target. The Howard government's policy is appalling. The government in Victoria and federally have passed a law which enables the police to enter your home on any pretence at all—in fact they don't even need one. Bush has done the same in the US to arrest Pakistanis on no grounds whatsoever.

"I don't think this protest is going to resolve anything in itself—Bush will go ahead no matter what, but at least we won't give him the satisfaction that we agree with him going ahead."

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