Sydney: 7, 000 students strike and rally against war

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Thousands of students, most of them from secondary schools, went on strike across Australia to join with youth around the world protesting against the looming war on Iraq. The students participated in lively demonstrations in the major cities, as well as in regional centres and country towns. Today we are posting on-the-spot WSWS reports from the protests in Sydney, Melbourne *and* Perth. *Further interviews and coverage of the demonstrations in other areas will be posted over the coming days.*

More than 7,000 high school students rallied and marched through Sydney as part of the international "Books not Bombs" student strike. The demonstration was passionate and angry about the drive to war against Iraq and the support being given to the Bush administration by the Australian Howard government. Assembling at the city's town hall, the youth marched through the central business district to Hyde Park, where 500,000 people gathered on February 16 in Australia's largest ever political demonstration.

The size of the student demonstration was all the more significant since Australian campuses have not resumed classes and few university students took part. The youth were overwhelmingly from secondary schools, with an average age of 14 to 17. The authorities at most schools permitted students to take part providing they had a note of permission from their parents. Some teachers took part alongside their pupils. Thousands of parents gave their support to the antiwar action by giving their children written authorisation. Numbers of youth told WSWS reporters they were regularly discussing politics at home and that their families had marched a fortnight ago.

Reflecting the broad sentiment against war, students participated from across the city. There were large delegations from inner Sydney government schools, with 300 from Burwood Girls and groups of 50 to 100 from Riverside Girls, Cheltenham High, Leichardt High and Fort Street High. Large delegations also rallied from the working class schools in Sydney's west—Auburn Girls, schools in Birrong, Wiley Park Girls, Parramatta High and Casula High. Numbers of youth came from religious-denominated private schools such as Saint Scholastica's, Santa Sabina, Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, Saint Clare's and International Grammar. Students traveled from as far away as Gosford High on the New South Wales central coast and Colo High in the Blue Mountains. In all, organisers estimated that at least 80 schools were represented.

The march was vocal and energetic and as it passed through the city it was warmly applauded and supported by workers, shoppers and tourists. Students painted their bodies with slogans or carried hand-written placards condemning the drive to war. Notable examples were: "Somewhere in Texas a village is missing its idiot"; "Blood and Oil don't mix"; "Oil War"; "I jigged history—It was repeating itself"; "Our future is in your hands"; and "NO HoWARd".

In stark contrast to the general public sympathy, the New South Wales Labor government ordered a provocative deployment of police to intimidate the students. A squad of mounted police and dozens of anti-riot special operations officers surrounded the final rally in Hyde Park. Senior police walked among the youth, noticeably questioning students of Middle Eastern appearance. Three youth were reportedly arrested en route to the park for minor offenses.

The speakers at Hyde Park were all students who were actively involved in preparing and building the strike. The speech of a young girl, who identified herself with the Greens, was interrupted by cheering and chants when she denounced the vast US

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expenditure on its military and contrasted it against the desperate poverty and environmental crisis affecting tens of millions of people. Another speaker, from the recently formed Riverview High School "Action Group", attacked the Howard government for ignoring the antiwar views of the majority and deploying Australian troops to the Persian Gulf.

The student strike testifies to a political ferment taking place among young people, many of whom are beginning to grapple with the complex questions associated with the renewed eruption of war. While most of the chants and slogans at the rally blamed the war drive on individual political leaders like Bush and Howard, some students are thinking far more deeply. In interviews with the WSWS, they articulated deeply-felt concerns that the militarism was being carried out for the economic interests of the wealthy and powerful, at the expense of the democratic and social rights of the world's majority.

A group of girls who came to Sydney from Gosford High condemned the drive to war while education is deteriorating: "If they are going to take money from our education to have wars, then we have a right to come down here and express that we don't want it. Our school is falling apart. We need the money for buildings and teachers. We are all Year 10 and we are saying we don't want war. It is just about egos and oil."

Scott, a Year 10 student from Vaucluse High told the WSWS: "The war is about Bush trying to get more power and oil, and it is about all these other countries going along with him like England and Australia. The Americans have spy satellites and inspectors in Iraq and they have found very little and what they have found was mostly destroyed. There is no justification for war. I'm not sure why the UN would vote for a war, but it won't change what I think. The American government is desperate. Its economy is failing. They need this war to survive. I say that is not a good enough reason to kill thousands of people. Bush is trying to save the American economy by killing people".

Many students have already sharply differentiated themselves from the official political justifications for war. Natalie, a Year 10 student from Cheltenham Girls, said: "Why should Australia be involved in a war on Iraq? What has it got to do with us? They say it is about weapons. What about America's weapons. Why should Iraq have to give up theirs while America keeps all that it has. I think America wants the oil. America is trying to take over every single country."

While there are illusions that protest alone can stop war, numerous students are preparing for a protracted struggle. A group of girls reported to the rally on the formation of an antiwar discussion group at their school in Strathfield. The Riverview "Action Group" is holding weekly meetings attended by dozens of students to discuss the war drive and other political issues. Students who spoke to the WSWS from other schools praised these initiatives and said they would be seeking to do the same. Organisation has already begun at Sydney schools for the next student strike planned for March 26.

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