

Australia: students protest against dismantling of university unions

Our reporters
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Thousands of tertiary students, academics and supporters participated in rallies across Australia on August 10, protesting against the Howard government's so-called voluntary student unionism (VSU) legislation, which aims to dismantle student unions.

In Sydney, about 5,000 people from campuses throughout the city, as well as Wollongong and Newcastle, held spirited marches into the city centre, where they staged a half-hour sit-down outside the town hall in George Street, one of the main thoroughfares. In Melbourne, some 2,000 students rallied at the State Library and concluded with a sit-down at the Swanston St-Flinders St intersection. A contingent from the Victorian College of the Arts marched up from St Kilda Rd.

About 600 students demonstrated in Brisbane's King George Square, while 200 took part in a protest in Perth and about 100 rallied in Adelaide's Victoria Square before marching to parliament house.

The demonstrations reflected deep-seated concerns among students about the underlying political and social agenda behind the VSU laws, which will prohibit universities from collecting fees for student unions and the wide range of welfare, counselling, advocacy, cultural, sporting and political services and activities that they support.

Banners and signs accused the government of seeking to politically silence students, with slogans such as "VSU is political censorship". They also indicted the broader "user pays" program of gutting all campus facilities so that services will be delivered only by private operators.

Noticeably, the mainstream media virtually ignored the demonstrations, except for misleading reports of violent clashes with police in Sydney, followed by two arrests, and paint-throwing at a Liberal Party office in Melbourne. Both incidents were isolated ones, provoked by small groups of pro-government supporters.

But the most striking feature of the "Day of Action" was the dead-end perspective advanced by the National Union of Students (NUS) and the various "radical" groups that function within it. The speeches consisted of nothing more than repeated "congratulations" for attending, urgings to "send a message to the government" and appeals to attend a further round of rallies on August 25.

As far as the student leaders were concerned, the rallies were intended to let off some steam, while they work behind the scenes,

together with the government, the Labor Party and others within the parliamentary establishment, including extreme right-wing National Party MPs, to strike a deal.

Not a word was said about the announcement by the Labor's spokesperson Jenny Macklin just two days earlier that the ALP would move an amendment to the government's Bill. Labor's plan would permit universities to continue collecting universal student service fees, on the condition that none of the money could be spent on political activities.

This proposal serves only to assist the government to achieve the central aim of the legislation, which is to politically silence students. As a Socialist Equality Party statement—"The issues at stake in the dismantling of student unions"—distributed at the marches explained:

"Macklin's statement is an obvious overture to National Party backbenchers and Independent MPs, as well as the university vice-chancellors, who have proposed 'VSU-lite' models. Reflecting concerns about the impact of the Bill on smaller regional universities, incoming National Party Senator Barnaby Joyce, for example, has proposed splitting the VSU Bill in two, with one part outlawing compulsory union dues, with the other allowing fees to be collected for sporting activities.

"In essence, all of these proposals seek to ensure that the student organisations, or university-run bodies, can continue to provide basic amenities, such as sporting facilities and cafeterias, while making a 'compromise' with the government to silence political dissent."

Apart from a few rhetorical references to the government's draconian new industrial relations legislation, none of the speakers at the rallies referred to the wider context of the drive to abolish student unions: the subordination of every aspect of social life to corporate profit-making, the ongoing assault on democratic rights or the war in Iraq.

As for "sending a message to the government," Education Minister Brendan Nelson responded contemptuously to the marches. Following talks with Joyce and other government MPs who have expressed reservations, he said the government remained "very strongly" committed to pushing through the Higher Education Support (Abolition of Compulsory Upfront Student Unions Fees) Bill 2005.

The rallies confirm that the government has no reason to fear the NUS and student union leaders, who are largely aspiring Labor Party politicians and trade union officials or their "left" allies in

middle class radical groups such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance. These layers have helped stifle and divert student opposition into empty protest politics since the Hawke Labor government first imposed fees on international students in 1986, followed in 1987 by the introduction of HECS fees for domestic students.

Notwithstanding this political suffocation, the VSU Bill reflects fears in ruling circles of signs of a new period of student radicalisation. This has been seen not only in opposition to ever-higher tuition fees and the transformation of universities into “degree factories” catering for the wealthy and corporate requirements, but more broadly in anti-globalisation demonstrations and the mass protests against the invasion of Iraq.

Students who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* gave voice to some of these fundamental concerns. Their comments were thoughtful and serious, in sharp contrast to the empty antics and political evasions of the student leadership.

Daniel, a first-year science student at Sydney University said: “I would like to see the preservation of student activities and choice within universities, and I don’t want to see universities becoming degree-processing factories. I use everything from student loans to social organisations, and I don’t want to see those things either disappear or become unaffordable.”

He condemned Labor’s “compromise” proposal. “I think it is pretty much a move to stifle certain political movements. Universities have always been, and are supposed to be, centres of free thinking and learning. It seems that a lot of left-wing movements start in universities. It is not just about stifling left-wing movements but others as well—social movements, gay groups and so on. The process is to destroy the entire institutions that we have.

“Over the past five or six years, there has been a lot of student opposition to the direction that the government has been taking. But the Labor Party doesn’t seem to be opposing anything head-on.”

Asked about the imposition of “user pays” throughout society, Daniel commented: “It means that you only have a say or get your way if you have the money behind you. If the VSU gets introduced, why don’t they go all the way and say that you only pay taxes for things you agree with?”

“I don’t agree with the war in Iraq, so why should I have my taxes spent on the war? I don’t agree with subsidising the cotton and sugar cane farmers in areas that can’t sustain sugar or cotton, so why should I be paying for that? I don’t agree with a lot of things, so why should my taxes be spent on them? I don’t mind paying taxes at all. You will always end up paying for things you don’t agree with, but it is vital that things keep on running.”

Caitlin, who is studying arts and education at the University of Sydney, and her friend Jenny, an archeology student, also drew connections between the issues facing students and the underlying pro-market agenda. Caitlin said: “If VSU comes in, we’re not going to have any of our union facilities, and the shops on campus will charge higher prices. Political activities are also an important part of university life. It concerns me that other people who feel they are in a minority won’t have a voice.”

Jenny added: “University has become somewhere that you come,

pay your cash and get out. It’s not university anymore like it was 30 years ago; it’s just a big company pushing out degrees. Tertiary education should be a basic right, free for all, including international students. It’s so sad that they limit things and say well, we are going to give so many places to people who can afford to pay \$10,000 extra a year. This leaves much less for HECS-paying students.”

Gareth, a landscape management and conservation student at the University of Western Sydney’s Hawkesbury campus, said he could not understand why Labor had proposed a “compromise”. “It is trying to take away the voice of a group of people. It’s wrong and it’s something that we have fought against in this country for a long time. Students must be able to voice their political opinions, pro or against. For Labor, it’s a cop-out.”

He said universities were not simply about lectures but a wider formative experience. “Students need to have counsellors free of charge to help us get through situations, and we need the social and the sporting facilities, and the bar and the food services, to meet and chat.

“Services should be provided, whether you use them or not. I don’t use the counsellors but I think it is great that they are there. I’d hate to see Australian hospitals like American hospitals, where if you can’t pay, it doesn’t matter how sick or injured you are.”

At the Melbourne march, James, a third-year Arts student from Monash University, said: “The VSU Bill is very politically motivated. After all, there is a breeding ground for politics at university. I’m very disappointed with the lack of opposition to VSU from the Labor Party.”

He recalled a fatal shooting of two fellow students by a distraught honours student on the Clayton campus in October 2002. “I was quite close to that and I sought counselling afterwards. Such student services would not exist under VSU. It just wouldn’t be available.”

Two friends from RMIT, Maryam from engineering and Shalmaa from PR-media studies, spoke of the VSU’s likely impact on international students. Maryam said: “International students often have assessment issues and so on. They won’t be in a position to lodge a complaint. Also, universities will be increasing their fees, without any student representation to oppose it.”

She agreed that the Bill was “aimed at political activity on campus. The government doesn’t want students changing other students’ minds.”



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