

Australia: National Union of Students promotes illusions in new Labor government

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A “National Day of Action” called by the National Union of Students (NUS) on Wednesday March 19th to issue demands to Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s government, has made clear the union’s role, along with that of the various middle class radical groups, in promoting illusions in Labor.

Many of Australia’s 915,000 students are, without doubt, deeply opposed to the increasing burdens being placed upon them, in the form of rising tuition fees, the removal or privatisation of campus services, and the paltry levels of government income support. Only a small number participated in the National Day of Action, however, in no way reflecting the depth of their concerns. An examination of the NUS’s campaign, expressed particularly sharply in its demands—“Abolish full fees”, “Scrap VSU [Voluntary Student Unionism]”, “Decrease HECS [Higher Education Contribution Scheme]”, “End Student Poverty” and “Demand a Better Future”—makes clear why. Ostensibly aimed at addressing their problems, the fundamental purpose of the rally was to corral students’ disaffection back behind the Labor Party, curtailing the development of a politically independent perspective.

Along with a march in Sydney, attended by ISSE members, students gathered in Newcastle, Bathurst, Wollongong, Brisbane, Melbourne, Adelaide and Canberra, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The Sydney rally convened at the University of Sydney before marching into the city, and was joined by between 250 and 400 students from the universities of New South Wales, Western Sydney, Macquarie and Wollongong and the University of Technology (UTS).

During the Sydney event, the NUS made no attempt to explain the history of the privatisation of Australian universities to students participating in the protest. To do so would have revealed the real record of the Labor Party.

The reintroduction of university tuition fees was carried out by the Labor government of Bob Hawke, after fees had previously been abolished under the Whitlam Labor government in 1974. International students were the first targets. Around a year later, in 1989, Hawke introduced HECS, a payment scheme whereby domestic students defer their tuition costs until they earn an income above a certain threshold, after which the government starts making weekly deductions. HECS fees were increased every year under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, before escalating rapidly between 1996 and 2007 under the Coalition government of John Howard. Now, under the new Rudd Labor government, HECS debts loom over the lives of hundreds of thousands of students and ex-students, standing at somewhere between \$13 billion and \$18 billion.

The NUS’s call to “decrease HECS” signifies its support for the scheme as a whole. The organisation does not stand for the principle of free education. Interviewed by the ISSE at the rally, 2008 NUS president Angus McFarland was asked why the student union failed to call for the abolition of the scheme. He replied that the NUS would only promote “short-term demands” which were “tangible and achievable” in the next

“one to two years.” When pressed on the issue he replied he did not want to “get into an argument over HECS.”

In 1996, the Howard government introduced “full-fee” degrees, providing students who could afford to pay the full cost of their degree access to university places that would otherwise not be available to them due to their academic results. In 2007, government restrictions were removed on the number of “full-fee” places each university could offer. As a result many domestic students now pay over \$100,000 upfront for their university degrees.

Foreign students, who make up approximately one fifth of the tertiary student population, are compelled to pay *all* their fees upfront, with many forking out more than \$20,000 per year.

Labor has pledged to phase out “full-fee” degrees in 2009, but only for domestic students. And, as McFarland confirmed to the ISSE, the NUS is not calling for the abolition of “full-fees” for international students. When we asked why, he replied that because the Labor government had already indicated it would phase out full-fee degrees for domestic students, this was what the NUS would demand.

The ISSE is completely opposed to this bankrupt perspective—to both its nationalism and its subservience to the Labor Party. HECS must be abolished, and international students must not be exploited as a readily available source of revenue. Education should be a fundamental right, freely provided for all students, wherever they happen to live, and whatever their country of origin.

The NUS’s demand to “Scrap VSU” also needs to be critically examined, in light of Labor’s position. Legislation implemented by the Howard government in July 2006 meant that universities were no longer able to compulsorily charge students a fee to finance student unions and campus organisations. Thus, “voluntary student unionism” or VSU, came into full effect on every Australian campus in 2007.

As the Socialist Equality Party wrote in 2005, one of the chief motivations for the introduction of VSU was to stifle political discussion on campus. Clubs and societies now face considerable difficulties in establishing themselves or gaining access to resources. Moreover, some \$170 million annually in funds have been withdrawn from services such as childcare, sporting facilities, advocacy, and subsidised food outlets, upon which many students rely.

After initially opposing the VSU legislation, Labor reneged on its position last May in the lead up to the federal election. Since then, Rudd has explicitly ruled out returning to compulsory student unionism, and has committed to nothing in terms of providing student organisations with adequate resources.

In a media release on February 17th, Federal Minister for Youth and Sport Kate Ellis merely stated that the government would “work to ensure” that university students “have access to vital campus services”, including “childcare, healthcare, counseling and sporting facilities.”

To stifle potential opposition from students, Ellis recently carried out a nationwide tour of campuses in which she heard submissions from

“representatives from universities, students, small business, sports and community groups” on the impact of VSU.

Rather than expose Labor’s hypocrisy, the NUS leadership has entirely adapted itself to it, promoting the lie that Labor is the only vehicle through which the demands of students can be met.

Last year, 2007 NUS president Michael Nguyen sought to justify Labor’s policy back flip when he declared on May 22nd, that the “old system” that existed before the VSU legislation was passed was “not the best”. In an NUS-run web forum Nguyen later insisted that “the reality is that if we don’t work with the ALP, we aren’t going to get any solution to VSU.” (See: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nat_education/message/7308)

McFarland has picked up where his predecessor left off. In a brief speech at the end of the NUS rally, the president failed to explain why VSU was introduced, or why Labor had changed its position.

Instead, he used the opportunity to promote the Labor Party. After insisting it was a “shame” that the Rudd government was not sufficiently listening to students, McFarland claimed the next two months, leading up to the May federal budget, was the time for the new government to say “we care about uni’s, about students.” The best thing students could do was to exert pressure on it.

In fact, the government has promised to slash billions of dollars from this year’s budget, a move which, in its own words, will bring “pain” to ordinary people. Rudd has, for example, announced that 2,000 jobs will be axed from Centrelink, the government agency that distributes benefits such as Youth Allowance.

The NUS has proposed its own new funding model for student organisations and services, which accepts entirely the “user-pays” principle that underpins both Labor and Coalition policy.

Under the NUS model, a compulsory HECS-style levy would be charged for student services. Students could then choose whether to become a member of their university student union. Fees from those students who chose not to would be used for a “Community Facilities Fund”, which would be used for such things as “student space, computer labs and sporting grounds.” In other words, students would be forced to subsidise the cost of university infrastructure and its maintenance.

The NUS also proposes that the government grant a “transition” fund to universities whose services and student organisations have had to shut since the introduction of VSU.

Students should completely reject any such “compromise” worked out between the Labor government and the NUS, and fight for their right to an education on the basis of an entirely opposed political perspective.

The assault on public education—primary, secondary and tertiary—is a product of the subordination of every aspect of economic and social life, in Australia and around the world, to the dictates of the “free market”. And Rudd Labor is just as committed to this agenda as Howard’s Liberal-National Coalition. Students can only begin to mount an effective struggle against it by participating in the development of a new political movement of the working class that fights for the complete reorganisation of society on socialist foundations, to meet human need, not private profit.

Such a perspective requires first and foremost a conscious political struggle against Labor and its apologists in the so-called “left”.

This is what the NUS and its allies seek, above all, to prevent. Particularly striking at the rally was the extremely unserious approach expressed in its slogans, and their occasionally vulgar character. Some marchers from UNSW, wearing NUS t-shirts, chanted repeatedly “They say VSU, we say, F.k You!” as they joined their fellow students at Sydney University.

Members of Resistance, the youth organisation of the Democratic Socialist Perspective, the main faction in the Socialist Alliance, happily distributed NUS flyers, as did members of the Socialist Alternative. Resistance members carried a banner stating “Unf.k the world.”

The only conceivable purpose of such slogans was to retard genuinely

critical thought, and promote the most superficial “radicalism”.

The ISSE asked Alex Bainbridge, who stood as a candidate for the Socialist Alliance in the last federal election, whether he agreed with the demands made by the NUS, since members of his organisation were distributing its leaflets. He declined to comment.

Despite the fact that the NUS’s express aim was to work with the new government, rather than oppose it, the presence of large numbers of regular and riot police at the Sydney rally expressed the acute sensitivity in ruling circles to any political movement among young people.

During September 7-9 last year, under the guise of protecting APEC delegates from “terrorist” activity, approximately 5,000 state and federal police and military personnel were deployed during the APEC summit to violently suppress the mainly young protestors, who had come to voice their legitimate opposition to US President George Bush and other world leaders.

Before last Wednesday’s rally commenced, police vehicles, including one from the “Public Order and Riot Squad”, lined the main road inside Sydney University. Teams of police continually walked past the assembled students as they listened to the rally’s speakers. Police maintained a cordon around the sides of the march and its rear, with officers spaced a few metres apart. In what has become a standard method of police intimidation, pictures were taken of those at the rally.

The political shift to the left among students and youth, which was directed against the Howard government in last year’s federal election, will inevitably come into direct conflict with the Rudd Labor government, as its right-wing character becomes ever more apparent. It is precisely for such a development that the forces of the state are being prepared.

Interviews by ISSE members with demonstrators indicated a growing sense of opposition to the problems students confront, and a sceptical, but still confused, attitude to the new Rudd Labor government.

The sentiments of an engineering student from UTS, T.J., were typical. He said “money should not restrict students’ right to education” and that the “rich shouldn’t simply get richer.” He observed that “the Labor Party’s all talk, no walk but we’ll see what happens.”

Rebecca, who studies science full time at UTS, was at the rally because “being a student means living below the poverty line”, and that attempting to work while studying was “virtually impossible.” She said, “It’s like, do I eat this week or do I buy my textbook for chemistry? Seriously, that happened last week.” She works two jobs.

While Rebecca thought the NUS’s perspective of pressuring Labor was “realistic”, she voted for Rudd in the last election “only as a way to get rid of Howard” and had hoped that Rudd would be “stronger on [opposing] the Iraq war.”

In a sign that young people are beginning to understand the international character of the problems they confront, a young traveller from Holland, although no longer a student, joined the demonstration after he happened to be walking nearby. He explained that Dutch students also pay high fees and face financial hardship, and that he had joined the Sydney rally to express his solidarity with students in Australia.



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