

# Australia: The Victorian government's “Walk for Harmony”: a cynical exercise in damage control

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The “Walk for Harmony” being led by Victorian Labor premier John Brumby this Sunday, July 12, is a thoroughly cynical public relations exercise, part of desperate efforts by the Rudd Labor government to shore up revenues from the lucrative international student market.

The walk will proceed through Melbourne's central business district before concluding with a free half-hour concert. In a June 2nd press release, the premier encouraged “all Victorians to stand-up” and affirm their “tolerance” and “multiculturalism” by participating. Publicity for the event has been tightly controlled, lest the walk provide a platform for further condemnation by international students of the Rudd and Brumby governments.

Providing education for international students is Australia's third highest export earner, behind coal and iron ore, bringing in approximately \$15 billion per year. But the country's desirability as a location for higher education has been called into question following violent and racist attacks against Indian students. The attacks met with protests by thousands of Indian students in Melbourne and Sydney at the end of May and the start of June—protests that were suppressed violently by police.

The safety of international students in Australia has since become a major theme in the Indian press, prompting expressions of concern from the highest levels of the Indian government. Chinese government officials have voiced similar misgivings over attacks on Chinese students in recent years.

Fearing a loss of their international student “market share”, Australian federal and state governments, led by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, have gone into damage control.

This week, a high-level Australian delegation touched down in Delhi, for what is effectively an official marketing exercise. Led by Colin Walters from the Commonwealth Department of Education, and including federal and state government officials, university representatives and police (such as assistant commissioner of Victorian Police Chris Evans), the delegation will tour eight Indian cities in nine days. Delegation members have already staged several photo opportunities with the families of Indian students in Australia, providing positive images for broadcast by India's news media. The delegation will tell Indian officials that Australia is a safe place to study.

Premier Brumby's “Walk for Harmony” is no less contrived. In his press release, Brumby said that while people in Victoria “come from different races, follow many faiths and cultures—we are all equal.” Nothing could be further from the truth.

The nearly 100,000 Indian and 130,000 Chinese youth studying in Australia, along with hundreds of thousands from other countries, are ruthlessly exploited and subject to discriminatory treatment.

Forced to pay tuition fees at rates exorbitantly higher than their domestic counterparts—for identical qualifications—international students are denied basic rights including concession fares for public transport, Medicare and income support. Moreover, since neither universities nor government provide any effective assistance in locating adequate accommodation, many students are forced to live in private rental accommodation in suburbs far from campus, returning home late at night from part-time or casual jobs in convenience stores, fast-food outlets and other similarly exploitative occupations, leaving them greatly susceptible to attacks.

Notwithstanding their damage-control campaigns, neither Rudd nor Brumby will provide international students with even the extremely limited conditions and rights of their domestic peers.

Victoria is particularly reliant on the international student market. According to Sally Sara, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) South Asia correspondent, the number of overseas enrolments in private vocational colleges in Victoria has increased by more than 500 percent in the past four years. Brumby's June press release noted that the state attracted 37.4 percent of business migrants to Australia and 26.9 percent of all skilled migrants: Hence his efforts to protect Victoria's image.

The utter contempt of Australian state and federal governments for the lives and wellbeing of international students has been exposed this past fortnight by some shocking statistics. An investigation by the *Sydney Morning Herald* found at least 54 international students died in Australia between November 2007 and November 2008.

State and territory coroners have refused to release details of these deaths, while the Rudd government told parliament in February that 51 had died, 34 of them from "unknown causes". International education expert Chris Nyland of Monash University has suggested a desire to protect the lucrative higher education export market is responsible for official efforts at masking the plight of international students.

The most obvious conclusion is that the federal government simply has no interest in gaining information about dead international students, who can no longer fulfil their previously useful role as cash-cows. Incredibly, universities and other educational institutions are not even required to provide the cause of death when reporting international student deaths to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Likewise, the federal Immigration Department is not legally required to collect information on deaths or injuries suffered by international students, despite their entry to Australia on visas supplied by the department, according to the ABC's correspondent Emma Bourke.

Given this context, the support given to the "Walk for Harmony" by the middle class radical organisations, the Socialist Alternative and the Socialist Alliance, demonstrates their role as apologists for Labor. According to its Victorian web site, the Socialist Alliance will coordinate its own "Anti-Racism contingent" at the walk. The Socialist Alternative,

meanwhile, is seeking to provide a left political cover for Premier Brumby. While criticising the "Walk for Harmony" as a "public relations stunt", a recent article by the Socialist Alternative's Jerome Small nevertheless calls on readers to participate on the basis that a "big rally" can provide support for "Indian students and other victims of racism." Attempting to sow illusions in the possibility of pressuring Labor, Small then provides a list of demands addressed to the Brumby government.

The International Students for Social Equality (ISSE), the student movement of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is fundamentally opposed to the reprehensible treatment and exploitation of international students by the Rudd Labor government and its state counterparts, which flows directly from their pro-market agenda. The ISSE is no less opposed to the political perspective of the radical organisations that sow illusions in Labor.

The ISSE demands that all students, whether born in Australia or overseas, be provided access to free university education, high quality accommodation, a living allowance, full transport concessions and healthcare. To fight for their most basic rights, students cannot rely on the state or federal Labor governments, but turn to the development of a powerful and unified movement of the international working class—cutting across racial and ethnic lines—that will reorganize society along socialist lines, making available its vast resources to fulfil these urgent social needs.



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