

Australia: International students protest lack of access to student concession cards

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Hundreds of students protested in Australia's largest cities, Sydney and Melbourne, on Wednesday to demand that international students be granted concession cards. At present international students are required to pay full fares on public transport—about twice as much as local students pay.

Students from Australia and overseas—about 200 in Melbourne and 300 in Sydney—rallied to demand an end to discrimination over access to public transport. That many international students participated was significant, because they are among the most vulnerable sections of the student body and subject to strict visa requirements relating to their study and work practices. If breached, these can result in deportation. Their attendance points to growing dissatisfaction and anger over their treatment as “cash cows” for the education industry.

In Melbourne the majority of students came from private colleges, such as the Hales, Gurkha, Holmes and Lonsdale institutes. Others attended from public universities, including the University of Melbourne. Students marched from the State Library—briefly blocking trams at the Bourke and Swanston streets intersection to hear speeches and chants—before arriving at the state parliament. In Sydney students from the University of Sydney, University of New South Wales, Macquarie and Newcastle universities gathered at the University of Technology in central Sydney before marching to state parliament, where officials and organisers delivered speeches.

Banners read, “Concession cards for all students”, “All students deserve equal rights”, and “Stop, stop discrimination”.

The rallies, organised by the Concession Card Coalition, were endorsed by several student groups, including the Federation of Indian Students Australia (FISA). Indian students comprised a significant section of the demonstrations. Their recent protests against racist attacks have already drawn international attention to the institutionalised discrimination and exploitation of visiting students in Australia.

International students are required to pay tuition fees upfront each semester, with an average of \$29,000 extracted from each

student annually. Visa restrictions require full-time study, with class attendance of up to 80 percent, and permit only a maximum 20 hours per week of paid work—typically in casual and minimum wage jobs. No public income support is provided, access to Medicare and other basic social services is denied, and little provision is made for affordable accommodation near the campuses, forcing students to live in overcrowded houses in outer suburbs.

The rally organisers promoted the fraudulent illusion that students could resolve these issues by pressuring the state and federal Labor governments. To this end, the Concession Card Coalition circulated petitions calling on the Labor Party to grant concession cards to international students. In Melbourne the petition was delivered to Victorian Premier John Brumby and Transport Minister Lynne Kosky. In Sydney, the state parliament received a submission from the National Union of Students (NUS).

NUS national president David Barrow addressed the rally in Sydney and called on those present to “return to the streets with thousands of students” to ensure their appeal would be a success. The Greens advanced a similar standpoint, with Greens Senator Sarah Hansen-Young declaring, “we need to see a change in psyche of the government” and calling on Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard to implement a national concession card scheme.

By promoting these speakers, the Socialist Alternative group, which functions in the Concession Card Coalition, sought to subordinate students to the very political establishment responsible for their predicament. Discrimination against international students is the direct outcome of the political agenda carried out by successive Liberal and Labor governments alike: to privatise the higher education system. Education has become the third highest earning export industry in Australia behind coal and iron ore, drawing in some \$15 billion annually in fees and student-related revenue.

The Labor government of Bob Hawke (1983-1992) began this process by imposing fees on international students in 1986, followed by the introduction of Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) fees on local students from 1987. The Rudd government is now accelerating this “user pays” and privatisation agenda by introducing a market-driven funding system for higher

education.

A movement in defence of equal rights for Australian and international students must take as its starting point the necessity of ending the subordination of education to the dictates of the market. Equality, and the defence of education as a fundamental democratic right, requires the abolition of fees for all students, no matter where they were born, or their families happen to live.

Members and supporters of the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) urged students at the Melbourne and Sydney rallies to turn not toward parliament, as urged by the official organisers, but rather toward the working class. The ISSE aims to unite all students and workers, irrespective of their race or nationality, against the capitalist system and the Rudd Labor government that enforces its dictates at the federal and state levels. Only through the development of an independent political movement of the working class, based on a socialist program, can the fight for free and high quality public education for all who want it be taken forward.

Several students in Melbourne and Sydney spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about their experiences and thoughts.

In Melbourne, one young person from India who studies at Hales College said: “I have to pay \$18.40 every day to catch the train to and from Geelong to study in the city. It’s the most basic right to have cheap travel for a student. Even in my country, if you are an international student you receive a student concession card....

“I find things to be very difficult here, and the racism is too much. I have paid around \$50,000 in the last two years for my course, and still they make you pay for everything else, including transport ... We pay more than any other students, but we don’t have the same rights. The Australian government makes it so the universities make \$15 billion out of us—everyone gets jobs from us being here, we are staying here paying rent, they make money, we eat here, they make money out of us—but we don’t get anything for it.

“I graduated from university in India in IT. I did six years of study. When I applied for my visa to complete my masters in Australia, the lawyer said I couldn’t because then I would be over-qualified for a job here. That’s why I am doing the hospitality course. There is no support for you if you are an international student.”

Another student described the burden of finding decent accommodation and meeting his tuition fees. “I have found accommodation to be very difficult to get here ... When I came here, I had to pay a sponsor to collect me from the airport. He let me stay at his place for 15 days, and after that time, he said ‘You have four days to find accommodation—I’m not letting you stay here anymore.’ I had to pay him around \$4,000, and then he just kicked me out. I only found a place to stay after friends from my uni helped me find something.

“If you don’t pay your fees, the lecturer doesn’t let you into the class until they’re paid. When they take the attendance at the start of the class, the computer won’t allow your attendance if you have not paid the fees. They say, in front of the whole class, where’s that student number? Then you go up to the front of the class, the lecturer says, ‘I can’t have you here, you have to go upstairs to pay the fees and then come down to the class.’ In some classes, the university accountant comes to the class and points out the students that haven’t paid. They call out in front of everyone: ‘You, you and you have to leave because you haven’t paid your fees.’

“The government here just sees international students as a source of money ... We are just seen as money, money and nothing else.”

In Sydney, Atif, an international student studying a community welfare program at a Technical and Further Education College (TAFE), said: “There is a lack of security for international students. The police discriminate against us because international students don’t know the law like Australian students and so can’t defend themselves ... International students don’t have jobs or accommodation and that is how problems arise.”

Alec Snazelle, a University of Sydney student, said: “There hasn’t been much of a change from the Liberals to Labor since the 2007 election ... Labor serves the same interests as the Liberals. Labor likes to promote themselves as the party of the workers but all they do is just hand out money with one hand and take away rights with the other.”

On the conditions and treatment of international students, Snazelle said it was unfair that they were just “dropped into the coals”, treated like “cattle” and charged “exorbitant visa fees”. As for the concession cards, he said international students “are probably more entitled to concession cards as they pay more”.



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