

Australia: Students boycott farcical NUS “Day of Action”

James Cogan
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The National Union of Students (NUS), the umbrella organisation for student unions across Australia, held a “National Day of Action” on March 31, ostensibly over the high cost of rental housing and the lack of adequate financial support for students.

Few political actions in recent memory have been as unserious and badly organised as this one. The protests were only announced a week in advance and were hardly promoted. The venues in New South Wales and South Australia were not even publicly advertised on the NUS or student union websites. Apart from a dozen or so NUS office holders, barely 30 students took part in the “rally” in Sydney and even fewer participated in a protest in Melbourne. At regional campuses like the University of Newcastle, nothing took place at all.

The small turnout cannot be explained by the incompetence of the NUS, however, and was certainly not due to apathy among students about the issues involved.

Lack of money dominates the lives of most young people attempting to get a tertiary education. The government’s Youth Allowance income support is a travesty. The majority of students—those under 25 years of age, living at home and whose parents earn less than \$76,000—receive between \$244.10 and \$45.67 per fortnight, depending on parental income and how many children in the family are studying. A student who is living away from home receives a maximum of \$377, plus \$75.60 rent assistance, per fortnight.

The fortnightly rent in cities such as Sydney and Melbourne, even for cheap share accommodation, is well over \$200 per person. Even on the strictest budget, food, text books, essential personal items, internet access, phone bills, clothes and basic health costs far more than Youth Allowance pays. Just transport on

trains or buses will generally cost over \$20 a week. A low-cost meal at a typical campus will cost more than \$5.

Overseas students, who have to pay thousands of dollars in annual up-front fees for their education, receive no assistance at all. In some states, they do not even receive concessions for public transport. It is common knowledge that hundreds of overseas students live in overcrowded housing and regularly go without meals.

The financial desperation of students, both domestic and overseas, has transformed them into one of the most exploited components of the low-income workforce, particularly in retail and service industries. A 2006 survey found that more than 70 percent of full-time students have jobs, working an average of 14.2 hours. Over 22 percent of students regularly miss classes or other study commitments in order to work. More than 50 percent believe that financial stress affects their studies in some way.

In the face of such conditions, the general boycott of the National Day of Action reflects the total lack of confidence among students in the protest politics of the NUS, which is dominated by aspiring Labor Party politicians and middle class “ex-left” organisations like Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative.

Students have years of experience with futile and often absurd protest stunts, which are all predicated on the claim that they will pressure governments to change policy. The National Day of Action, for example, was preceded by a “Noodle Day” on March 24, in which the NUS urged students to try to set a world record for the number of people eating noodles at the same time. This was supposedly going to help convince the right-wing Rudd Labor government to provide higher rent assistance and a national travel concession scheme that

included overseas students. The contempt of most people for such antics is invariably used by the NUS to assert that students are apathetic and not prepared to fight.

The truth is the claim of the NUS and other organisations that Labor can be pushed to the left through protest is false to the core. Within the working class in general, whatever vague hopes existed before the last election that Labor would effect some type of progressive change from the Howard Liberal/National coalition government have well and truly dissipated. The Rudd government has continued or expanded every reactionary policy of its predecessor. It is the committed representative of the financial and corporate establishment.

The changes Labor introduced this month to Youth Allowance, for example, do not raise the rate of payment by one cent. Labor's "budget neutral" measures have lifted the parental income at which students receive the maximum payment, but made it far harder for students to become "independent". Youth now have to work fulltime for a minimum of 30 hours a week for at least 18 months before beginning their studies in order to qualify for the poverty-level "independent" allowance of \$377 per fortnight. A Labor election pledge that it would raise the amount that students can earn through part-time work before they lose part of their allowance has been "delayed" until 2012.

At the school level, Labor has introduced the "MySchool" ranking system to impose merit pay and other punitive "performance-based" schemes on teachers, and to create the conditions for the closure of so-called "underperforming" public schools. In the United States, a similar policy has led to the shutting down of hundreds of public schools and the expansion of privately run charter institutions. Labor is already boosting profit-making private vocational training providers at the expense of the public TAFE colleges.

Over 25 years of free market restructuring by both Labor and conservative governments have thoroughly corporatised the university system, which is increasingly reliant on corporate sponsorship and full-fee paying students. Courses are being tailored to the requirements of business. Free education is a thing of the past, with all students finishing their studies with large Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS)

debts.

Around the world, public education is now one of the prime targets of governments attempting to offload the cost of the global financial and economic crisis onto the backs of the working class. After bailing out the banks and corporations to the tune of trillions of dollars, the ruling elite is now declaring there are no resources to finance basic rights such as an education. The reality is that the capitalist class, whose interests dictate government policy, has no interest in paying to educate an entire layer of youth who are destined under the profit system only for low-paid jobs or unemployment.

A genuine fight for free, high quality education, from kindergarten to university, is inseparable from an open political struggle against capitalism and its political representatives in the Labor government. The aim of demonstrations and other action by students must be to assist in the development of a working class movement based on an international and socialist perspective. The critical question is which class controls society's wealth. There is no solution to the social crisis facing workers and youth outside of the banks and major corporations being placed under public ownership and the democratic control of working people, and economic life reorganised on a world scale to meet social need, not private profit.

Any viable movement will need to be politically independent of the pro-capitalist trade union apparatus and organisations like the NUS, which, like their counterparts in every other country, attempt to divert, dissipate and suppress resistance to the agenda of the ruling class.

We urge all students who agree with this perspective to join and build the International Students for Social Equality at campuses, TAFEs and schools across Australia.



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