

SEP candidate speaks on crisis facing students

Zac Hambides
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The following is the text of the speech delivered by Socialist Equality Party candidate Zac Hambides to a public meeting held on August 4 in the electorate of Kingsford Smith in eastern Sydney. Hambides, who is president of the University of NSW's International Students for Social Equality (ISSE), spoke about the worsening crisis facing tertiary students. Nick Beams, SEP national secretary and candidate for the Senate in NSW, also spoke, addressing the international economic and political context in which the election was taking place and the SEP's attitude to the political positions of the Green Party and pseudo-left organisations such as Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative.

The meeting was attended by local workers, students from UNSW and retirees. The candidates' speeches provoked questions on the Trotskyist movement's attitude to the environmentalist "steady-state" economic theory and the response of the National Union of Students (NUS) to the undermining of tertiary education. The meeting in Kingsford Smith is part of a series organised by the SEP prior to the August 21 election. Meeting details as well as extensive election coverage can be found [here](#).

The Socialist Equality Party, as part of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is the only party that explains to workers the real situation they face. We tell the truth. Our program raises the burning social issues faced by workers, students and youth in Australia and across the world.

This distinguishes the SEP from every other party standing in this election and it is for this reason that I am standing for the SEP in Kingsford Smith.

It is clear from discussions we have had with workers and students at the University of NSW, shopping mall campaigns and door-knocks that there exists widespread opposition and mistrust to the manner in which Kevin Rudd was removed from office. The events of 23-24 June constituted a political coup carried out against a democratically elected prime minister within a matter of 24 hours. This was done by the Labor Party itself, on behalf of the likes of Rio Tinto, BHP Billiton and Xstrata who are in the top five mining companies in the world.

The program of the next government has been determined by these events. Parliamentary democracy and voting in elections have been revealed to be nothing other than a charade to hide the fact that real political decisions, down to the very personnel of the government, are determined by massive international corporate, financial and imperialist interests.

The next government will be based on the escalation of the war in Afghanistan, the continued destruction of the jobs, wages, living standards and job security of workers and youth and austerity measures against social services for the working class.

Central to these austerity measures is the question of tertiary education, on which I will focus my remarks today.

I am a student at the University of NSW and I know from personal experience the immense difficulties, stresses and obstacles that decades of free market restructuring have created. These pervade all aspects of the life of students who are engaged in the pursuit of those qualifications necessary for securing a well-paid, secure job, or something resembling it.

Students in Australia exist under some of the most appalling conditions of the working class as a whole. Seventy percent of students work during semester to cover study and living expenses which the poverty-level, government granted Youth Allowance does not cover. The highest payment that a student on Youth Allowance, who is living away from home and is not working full-time receives, is just over \$450 a fortnight or about half the poverty line. So the average employed full-time student works 14.5 hours a week, three times as much as in 1984.

This affects the overall health and ability of students to engage in effective study. According to the National Union of Students, 1 in 8 students regularly go without a meal because of lack of finances, with 1 in 2—or 50 percent—reporting that their studies are adversely affected by financial stress.

The conditions facing students did not simply appear fully formed from the foam of the sea like a negative Aphrodite, but are the result of a consciously determined policy of successive Labor and Liberal governments to subordinate all aspects of education to the interests of the market and corporate profit. Primary among the two parties in this process has been the role played by the Labor Party.

In the 1980s and 1990s, in response to the demands of ever more globalised capitalist production, governments around the world implemented a wholesale restructuring of industry. This was carried out by the Thatcher government in the UK, the Reagan administration in the US, and in Australia it was carried out by the Hawke-Keating Labor governments of 1983-1996. Labor implemented the dismantling of entire industries and the associated permanent loss of full-time jobs, especially in the manufacturing industries, the privatisation of social services and the growth of financialisation. In these years in office Labor presided over the largest upward redistribution of wealth in the history of Australia, creating the biggest-ever polarisation between rich and poor.

Central to this process was the beginning of the attack on the system of free education and student living allowances. Some in this room would remember and were in fact educated under this system but for my generation there has been no free education.

The Hawke Labor government began the attack in a piecemeal fashion, using the most vulnerable and exploited section of the student body—international students—as the test for measures to be implemented more broadly.

In March 1985 the Hawke government announced that universities would be able to allocate places to full-fee paying international students. This was immediately recognised within ruling circles with an editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* noting: "If this represents the thin end of the wedge for the reintroduction of tertiary fees for well-to-do Australian students and their families, so much the better."

Their hopes were confirmed when at the start of the academic year in 1987 Hawke introduced the Higher Education Administration Charge of \$250 to be applied to all students as an annual fee.

This marked the turning point in the destruction of free tertiary education: 13 years after it had been introduced by the Whitlam Labor government in 1974, it was the Hawke Labor government that put the first nail in its coffin. At the same time, Labor introduced the means-tested Austudy allowance, which replaced the broadly accessible Tertiary Education Assistance Scheme and which has subsequently evolved into today's poverty-level Youth Allowance.

These actions, which were rightly seen among students as the beginning of the attempt to introduce a full "user pays" system for education, led to over 10,000 students boycotting the fee across Australia. Thousands of students held demonstrations in Melbourne and Sydney, where an occupation led to the use of police to break it up. But the student unions refused to defend the principle of free education and bitterly opposed any challenge to the Hawke government.

The role played by the student unions allowed the Hawke government to step up its offensive, in collaboration with the trade unions. In June 1988 delegates to the ALP national conference, including various trade union bureaucrats, dropped the Labor Party's nominal support for free tertiary education. The next year, the Hawke Government introduced the Higher Education Contribution Scheme or HECS, burdening all students with debts of \$1,800 a year.

What had been established by Labor created the conditions for what followed under Liberal Prime Minister John Howard's government. HECS was increased by an average of 40 percent under a three-tier system, \$600 million was slashed from the higher education budget and full-fee paying places were extended to Australian nationals, as well as international students.

At the close of the 2009 financial year, the accumulated HECS and new Higher Education Load Program debt was \$17.8 billion; one-quarter of which the government admits it does not expect will ever be repaid. International students are required to pay their fees upfront at 3-5 times what Australian national students have to pay.

The SEP and the ISSE have learned that some international students, under severe financial crisis, have resorted to homelessness in order to continue living and studying in Australia. The ISSE defends the rights of international students to free tertiary education and to a decent living allowance, and opposes their treatment as one of the most exploited and vulnerable sections of students. They are often forced to work illegally for more than the 20 hour a week limit imposed as part of their visa requirements, just in order to meet their fees.

Despite the massive increase in the cost of education and with it the destruction of living allowances, the quality of education has plummeted with staff-student ratios increasing from 12.9 in 1990 to 20.5 in 2006.

Assuming students or their families are capable of paying the exorbitant

fees, the combined impact of these measures has an immensely stultifying effect on the ability of students to develop their political, social, physical and recreational life. This has been exacerbated by the introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism, which has effectively ended any real cultural or political life on campus, to the extent that it existed before.

Under these conditions, one of the major factors behind the support extended by the ruling elites to Julia Gillard to replace Rudd has been her role as minister for education.

Gillard established her utterly right-wing credentials, at the direct expense of the working class, by her personal oversight over the misnamed "education revolution".

The purpose of the "education revolution" is to further tie education to the direct interests of industry and the ever-changing requirements of the global financial markets.

At universities across Australia, management is being forced to seek out alternate methods of funding, based ultimately on fluctuations in the market, as a result of decades of chronic underfunding. This in turn demands a more flexible hiring regime to better respond to these fluctuations.

Under Labor's new voucher type system, funds will more directly follow student enrolment. Universities Australia predicts a 30 percent to 50 percent downturn in international student enrolments from China, meaning competition between universities will only increase, with UNSW this year having over-enrolled by 17 percent to secure its share of the student market. This is essentially what education has become: a market.

Central to this entire process is the divisive and cynical role of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU). At the University of Western Sydney (UWS), Victoria University in Melbourne (VU) and the University of NSW, disputes have erupted over the casualisation of the academic workforce. At UWS, the NTEU has already agreed to a new agreement that forces staff onto 14 different types of contracts, some lasting only 6 months.

The NTEU has done everything to ensure that the conflicts at UWS, VU and UNSW have not been linked. It has therefore prepared the conditions for the implementation of the casualisation measures demanded by the "education revolution".

This has been the role of the unions during the past three decades. In dividing the struggles of the working class, the unions have worked hand in glove with management to push through deals that meet its demands. This has been justified to workers on the cynical basis that they must be "internationally competitive" with their counterparts overseas. In other words, they must not only agree to having their own wages and conditions continually slashed but must help enforce the same process on their brothers and sisters in other countries.

In opposition to this utterly bankrupt and nationalist perspective, the Socialist Equality Party calls for the pouring of billions into education to ensure free, high quality education for all who wish to access it, including for international students. We therefore call for the immediate abolition of all student fees and debts. All students must receive a living wage upon entering their studies to ensure there are no financial obstacles to their intellectual, cultural and physical development.

Education is both a democratic right and a social responsibility and it

must be defended as part of a program of the working class that is based on socialist and internationalist principles.

That is the program and perspective of the Socialist Equality Party. I appeal to everyone here to take up this program as necessary for the establishment of a genuinely democratic, and humane society that is organised, on a rational and international basis, for the satisfaction of human need, not private profit.

I call on all of you here tonight to give your full support to the SEP's election campaign and, in this way, to help expand our influence among the working class, youth and students. In particular, I appeal to you to participate in letter-boxing our election statement, so that every household in the electorate receives one; to come to our election committee meetings to discuss the political issues and organisational tasks of the campaign; to hand out how to vote cards on polling day at the polling booths; to vote SEP in Kingsford Smith, and in the Senate, and, above all, to seriously study our statement, read the *World Socialist Web Site* and the SEP's *Statement of Principles*, and, if you agree, then, most importantly, apply to become a member.

Click here for full coverage of the SEP 2010 election campaign

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