

Oppose the exploitation of international students

Patrick O'Connor, SEP candidate for Melbourne
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The systematic exploitation of international students is widespread in Melbourne, yet none of my rivals in the upcoming by-election has raised the issue. This reflects the sensitivity of all of the establishment parties to the enormous financial interests at stake.

International education has become a lucrative market in Australia, and Victoria in particular. It is the third largest “export” nationally after coal and iron, responsible for up to \$16 billion in revenue each year. In 2011 more than 160,000 international students were enrolled in Victoria from over 160 nations. This industry generated \$4.8 billion in 2010-2011, making it the state’s single largest foreign exchange earner.

The Melbourne electorate contains two universities—RMIT and the University of Melbourne—with large enrolments of foreign students. Nationally, nearly one in four tertiary students comes from overseas. These students are charged exorbitant tuition fees—often \$20,000 to \$40,000 a year—considerably more than Australian students. Furthermore, they must pay their fees upfront, as they are barred from the HECS-HELP scheme of government loans to students.

In order to survive, many of these students, like their domestic counterparts, are forced to take jobs, often in the most exploitative areas. They work in late-night jobs driving taxis or operating service stations and fast-food bars, or work for less than \$10 per hour in cafes and restaurants. Government legislation limits them to 20 hours a week during semester, compelling some to take second, off-the-books jobs with terrible pay and conditions.

In addition, the federal Labor government denies foreign students access to basic social services, including unemployment benefits, the Medicare health scheme and housing support. In the states of Victoria and New South Wales, they do not even have concession rates for public transport. As a result, many are condemned to shocking living conditions.

Rents in inner Melbourne close to campus are very high—often more than \$400 a week for a single bedroom apartment. Many students live in overcrowded share-houses or dilapidated apartments without fully functioning utilities. Those who move further out to take advantage of cheaper rents are hit by high transport costs. A *Herald Sun* survey of 2,000 international students in March revealed 89 percent would not recommend Victoria to other students, simply because of the price of public transport.

The lack of access to health care has led to desperate situations. Last November, the *Australian* reported that Rosmizi Rahman, a 31-year-old PhD student, delivered his wife’s baby in a car park after bypassing three Melbourne hospitals where they had previously been denied service. According to the *Australian*, except in emergencies, hospitals in Melbourne and Brisbane simply refuse to accept patients without Medicare cover. In May, 27-year-old Claudia Gonzales was rejected by two Queensland hospitals when she sought maternity services.

All the major parties—Labor, Liberal and the Greens—are responsible for the situation where international students are treated as nothing more than commodities. The Hawke Labor government began the process in 1986 by introducing fees for international

students, as the first step in abolishing free tertiary education nationally.

The present Labor government is further subordinating tertiary education to the demands of business as part of its broader austerity agenda. Connected to its market-driven “education revolution,” it has introduced a funding scheme that ties university revenues directly to student enrolments, leading to cuts and closures in courses not regarded as commercially viable. In fierce competition with each other to survive financially, universities across Australia have begun cutting costs through staff retrenchments and larger class sizes.

The government demonstrated its contempt for international students during a spate of violence and abuse against Indian students in 2009 and 2010. Its sole concern was to maintain Australia’s “market share” of foreign students by dispatching a high-level business delegation to India as part of a public relations exercise. Since then, the conditions for international students have only gotten worse.

All over the world, young people are bearing the brunt of the deepest global economic crisis since the Great Depression. Youth unemployment across Europe is now officially 22.4 percent. In the United States, young people leave college burdened with massive debts and unable to find work. Faced with the failure of their own system, capitalist governments of all political persuasions have no solution but to impose further burdens on the working class and young people.

I appeal to Australian students, young people and the working class to come to the aid of international students. The SEP insists that workers and youth should have the right to live, work and study in any part of the world with full citizenship rights and access to services. One of the reasons that the other parties in this campaign have nothing to say about international students is because these young people are denied the right to vote in Australia.

The working class as a whole can only defend its basic rights by building an independent movement that unifies its struggles nationally and internationally

against the profit system and its political defenders and apologists. Workers and young people in Australia have the political responsibility of defending overseas students and opposing all forms of racism and discrimination. By doing so, they will take a powerful step toward unifying working people across national, ethnic and religious lines.

The SEP’s campaign in this by-election is aimed at providing a new, socialist and internationalist, political perspective to the working class. We demand the right to free, high quality education and healthcare for all. All students must receive an allowance that provides decent living conditions throughout their studies.

The struggle for such a program requires a new perspective, based on the fight to overthrow capitalism and organise society’s resources to meet human need, not private profit. If you agree with this perspective and the program outlined in our election statement, I urge you to contact the SEP and join our campaign.

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