

IYSSE challenges unions, Greens at Australian student protests

Our correspondents
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Protests and rallies were held at university campuses in Sydney and Melbourne yesterday in response to the weekend announcement by the Australian Labor government that it will slash \$2.3 billion from tertiary education spending over the next several years.

The cuts are the most draconian in nearly two decades. A \$900 million “efficiency dividend” will plunge universities into another round of retrenching staff and eliminating courses, while the transformation of scholarships into repayable loans will force many working class students to abandon plans for studies. As soon as the cuts were announced, renewed calls were being made in the *Australian Financial Review* for higher university fees.

The government linked the cuts to the tertiary sector to additional spending for the so-called “Gonski” reforms in primary and secondary schools. The Gonski measures centre on a voucher-style system of funding and the performance ranking of schools that is intended to undermine the public system and pressure more families to use fee-paying private schools.

The National Union of Students (NUS), the peak body of student unions, called yesterday’s protest rallies in a bid to head off anger among students over the government’s cuts. Only a token attempt was made to campaign for the rallies and attendances were low. Along with the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) representing university staff, the NUS has been instrumental in blocking any political fight by staff and students against the Labor government’s attacks on tertiary education.

At rallies at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and University of Technology in Sydney (UTS), attended by 100 or so people, NUS president and Labor Party member Jade Tyrrell declared that it was “shocking” and “terrible” that the cuts were being

carried out by a Labor government. But she then proposed a futile campaign of letter-writing and protests aimed at pressuring the federal government to reverse its measures.

In Sydney, NTEU NSW secretary Genevieve Kelly likewise criticised the cutbacks but promoted the illusion that they would be blocked in the parliamentary upper house by the Greens. In fact, the Greens have propped up the Gillard government for the past three years and passed all of their regressive budgets—and will do so again.

Both the NUS and the NTEU speakers echoed the Gillard government’s fraudulent claim that its Gonski policies would bring greater “equity” and “better education” for the school sector. Their only concern was that the Gonski measures should not be at the expense of university education—in other words, other public services should suffer instead.

Members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party, distributed a statement outlining a socialist perspective to defend education and addressed the rallies in Sydney and Melbourne.

Zac Hambides, from the UNSW IYSSE, told the protest that the fundamental issues facing students had been deliberately covered up by the union speakers. He denounced the NTEU and NUS for once again promoting the delusion that protests to university managements or to politicians could reverse the cuts.

Stressing the international dimensions of the assault on public education, Hambides said: “The Labor government is a government of big business and finance. Its attacks on education are part of a global assault on the rights of the working class, to make workers and young people pay for the breakdown of capitalism since 2008.”

Hambides said that “protests alone are not enough to defeat the government’s agenda”. He called for the fight “for a socialist program and for a workers’ government”, which “would rationally reorganise society and make available to education and other essential rights the resources held by the banks, the mining companies and big business.”

He condemned the establishment of a US marine base and the Gillard’s government’s other military agreements with the Obama administration, which will be paid for by even deeper attacks on education, health and other social services.

In Melbourne, approximately 200 students from different universities rallied at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), before marching through part of the city centre. Speakers at the rally included Jeannie Rea, NTEU national president, and Adam Bandt, the Greens’ lower house MP.

Bandt, whose vote has been critical to keeping the minority Labor government in power since 2010, demagogically claimed that the Greens would not support the tertiary budget cuts. In reality, the Greens have pledged to pass the government’s budgets. As in the past, any alterations that the Greens manage to extract through their horse-trading with Labor will be purely cosmetic.

In both cities, the representatives of the pseudo-left organisations, including Socialist Alternative, Socialist Alliance and the Socialist Party, either did not speak or simply echoed the words of the NTEU and NUS.

At the RMIT rally, IYSSE member Will Morrow, a University of Melbourne student, sharply opposed the perspective advanced by the NUS, NTEU, and specifically challenged the Greens. After outlining the right-wing, pro-business character of the Labor government and its “education revolution”, he explained:

“Young people need to make an assessment of the political forces we are up against. The entire political establishment in Australia and internationally supports austerity. Labor would not be able to carry out these cuts were it not for the support in parliament of the Greens, which is propping up the minority Gillard government.”

Obviously stung by the criticism, Bandt interjected with the Greens’ stock-in-trade rationale for their alliance with Gillard, asking if he thought that

opposition Liberal Party leader Tony Abbott “would be better?”

Morrow was applauded by students as he answered: “The NTEU and Greens promote illusions in the Labor Party as the so-called lesser evil, while the [government’s] attacks go on. The defence for education and all the social rights of young people and the working class requires a political struggle against these organisations, a break with them, and the fight for a socialist program.”

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