

The political issues in the fight to defend education

Zac Hambides—SEP Senate candidate for NSW
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The \$2.3 billion in cuts to university education that are being imposed by the Gillard Labor government raise decisive political issues before students, academics and general staff.

Courses, jobs and conditions are threatened by Labor's "efficiency dividend" that will see universities around the country slash \$900 million from their budgets. Another \$1.2 billion will be gouged out of the pockets of students seeking higher education through the transformation of the start-up scholarship of \$2,000 into a loan that they will be required to pay back. A further \$230 million will be extracted by eliminating the discount on early payment of fees.

The rationale given by the Labor government—that the cuts will be used to finance its "revolution" in primary and secondary education—is a lie. The new Gonski funding model is part of a free market, cost-cutting agenda that entrenches the flow of public funds to the wealthiest private schools and lays the foundations for the introduction of a voucher scheme that will further undermine the public education system. The short term costs of establishing the new funding model will be recouped by using "performance rankings", through NAPLAN tests and teacher rankings, to declare public schools "underperforming" and encourage even more student transfers to the fee-paying private sector. In the US, Britain and New Zealand, similar systems have been used to close down schools, sack teachers and slash working conditions.

Labor's agenda in tertiary education is to strangle funding and complete the transformation of universities into thoroughly corporatised institutions, which will tailor courses to the needs of business and intensify the push for the removal of any limits on fees. Already, the average HELP student debt has reached \$15,200, taking graduates more than eight years to repay. The

discriminatory up-front fees international students are forced to pay have already reached financially crippling levels.

The source of Labor's attempt to impose ever more of the cost of education onto students and their families is the deepening crisis of the world capitalist economy, and the efforts by governments everywhere to protect the wealthy elite, and their banks and corporations, by making the working class pay for the consequences. The forthcoming May 14 budget cuts are part of the same austerity agenda that is being inflicted on the populations of Europe and the United States. Like its counterparts internationally, the Gillard government has ruled out increases in taxation on corporate profit or the private fortunes of the rich. Instead, it has mapped out an assault on social welfare, public health and public education. At the same time, behind the backs of the Australian people, it has allocated billions of dollars to finance the expansion of the armed forces under its commitments to the US Obama administration's military build-up in Asia and preparations for war with China.

The fight against war and austerity, of which the latest cuts are just one aspect, immediately poses the need for a political struggle against the Labor government and the capitalist interests it defends. This struggle must be based on a socialist and internationalist program that rejects the fraudulent claim that there is "no money," and insists, instead, that the resources currently being squandered be made available to meet the social rights of the working class, including the right of all young people to a free, high quality education from pre-school through to technical training or university. That is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE).

The SEP and IYSSE warn that no such struggle will be undertaken by the pro-capitalist trade unions, including the National Union of Students (NUS). The demonstrations they have called are intended to protect the Labor government, not fight it. They have declared their support for its free market Gonski measures, while downplaying the tertiary cuts as simply “dumb.” The unions and NUS are making every effort to cover up the fact that Gillard’s agenda is driven by the dictates of the banks and major corporations, promoting the political deception that protests alone can pressure Labor to abandon its policies. For three decades, opposition to the corporatist restructuring of education has been demoralised and dissipated by such appeals to the very governments imposing it.

The most strident advocates of impotent protest politics are the pseudo-left organisations such as Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative, which do everything possible to subordinate students and staff to the unions and the NUS.

Socialist Alliance and its youth organisation Resistance claimed on May 4 that “the government’s plan to cut university funding can be defeated, but only if there is a prolonged and determined fight against it.” They falsely asserted that a protracted strike by Canadian students in Quebec last year, had “stopped an increase in student fees and led to the electoral defeat of the government.” In fact, the leadership of the student strike, including the organisation known as CLASSE, called it off and channelled it behind a trade union campaign to elect the opposition Parti Québécois. Upon taking office, the PQ government cut \$250 million from university budgets and in February raised fees by three percent. Further fee increases are being prepared in negotiations between the government, business heads and the unions.

Socialist Alternative has also falsified the experience in Canada, claiming that “building a combative student movement is both possible and proven as a winning strategy for pushing back government attacks.” The actual experience, not only in Canada but across Europe, where major cuts have been inflicted on every area of public spending, is that governments, whether nominally “left” or right wing, have proceeded with vicious austerity measures despite the overwhelming opposition of ordinary people. Amid the greatest economic breakdown since the Depression, the

financial elite is insisting on nothing less than a social counter-revolution that eliminates the social gains won by the working class in the decades after World War II. Far from governments reversing their policies in the face of mass opposition, they are turning to ever more anti-democratic and authoritarian methods to impose them.

Students and staff need to take stock of the international context in which the Gillard government’s budget is being imposed. The opposition to education cuts can only be developed with the conscious understanding that it requires a struggle against the capitalist profit system itself, which is the source of the assault on living standards and the drive to war and dictatorship underway internationally.

The IYSSE calls for a struggle against Labor’s budget cuts that is developed in conscious political opposition to the trade unions and NUS. At every campus, committees of students and staff should be formed that launch an appeal for a coordinated political and industrial campaign to other sections of the working class, beginning with school and TAFE teachers and students who are also enduring the consequences of Gillard’s restructuring.

The entire working class must be politically mobilised against the Labor government, its trade union defenders and pseudo-left apologists, in the fight for a workers’ government based on socialist policies. The banks and major corporations must be placed under public ownership and democratic control, and economic priorities reorganised to meet social needs, not private profit.

This perspective is at the centre of the Socialist Equality Party’s campaign for the September 14 election. I urge all students who agree with the need to fight these cuts to join the IYSSE, participate in the SEP’s election campaign, and play your part in the fight to build the SEP as the new revolutionary leadership of the working class.

Authorised by Nick Beams, 113/55 Flemington Rd, North Melbourne 3051



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