

Australia: University students and staff demonstrate against Labor's education cuts

Our reporters
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Marches and rallies called by the National Union of Students (NUS) and National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) were held in capital cities and regional centres yesterday against the \$2.3 billion in cuts to tertiary education contained in the Labor's government budget, brought down last night. The cutbacks, the most severe in 17 years, transform a student grant scheme into a repayable loan, strip universities of \$900 million in funding and eliminate a discount for the early payment of student fees.

In Melbourne, Victoria, as many as 2,000 university and high school students, academics and other opponents of the cuts rallied in the city centre. Hand written banners included, "Education for all, not just the rich!", "Tax the rich, no cuts" and "Education for public good not marketisation."

In Sydney, a rally of about 300 people took place, involving students and staff from the University of Sydney, University of Technology and Macquarie University and small delegations of union officials from the NTEU, the Public Services Association (PSA) and the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF). Prior to the protest, police attacked a small number of students and staff picketing the entrance to the University of Sydney, where the NTEU and PSA had called a strike as part of their negotiations with management over the terms of a new enterprise agreement. Police brutally attempted to break up the picket. One student was hospitalised with a broken leg, while another reported that he had been held in a chokehold for close to a minute.

Small demonstrations also took place in Canberra, as well as in Armidale and Newcastle in regional NSW; capital cities Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth; Hobart and Launceston in Tasmania, and Darwin in the Northern Territory.

At the rallies in Melbourne and Sydney, members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) distributed a statement authored by Zac Hambides, one of two SEP candidates for the Senate in New South Wales in the scheduled September 14 federal election, and currently studying at the University of NSW.

The statement stressed that the international context of

Labor's austerity budget was the global failure of the capitalist profit system and the efforts of governments around the world to make the working class pay for the consequences, through the destruction of living standards and public services. It explained: "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, the statement stressed, immediately posed "the need for a political struggle against the Labor government and the capitalist interests it defends." (See: "The political issues in the fight to defend education")

The NTEU and NUS rallies, in contrast, were called with the conscious intention of blocking a political fight against the Gillard government and diverting opposition and anger among students back behind the existing parliamentary set up.

In Sydney, union officials and the NUS focussed on sowing illusions that protests and other appeals to the government could reverse the attacks on higher education, at the same time promoting the fraudulent claim that the Greens-backed minority Labor government was a "lesser evil" to the conservative Liberal-National Party coalition led by Tony Abbott. In Melbourne, many of the vetted speakers did not even maintain the pretence that they intended to press the government to reverse the cuts. NTEU officials told demonstrators that the campaign would go on for "years." The immediate task, union representatives insisted, was to campaign against the Liberal Party in the September federal election.

NTEU general secretary, Graham McCulloch, said that the union would conduct "the largest single campaign we have ever run in a federal election." This would be aimed, he

declared, at “holding the Labor government to account” and ensuring that the opposition Liberal Party did not win control of the Senate. In other words, the NTEU will campaign for Labor’s re-election, while advocating a vote for the Greens in the upper house.

The stage-managed rally was then handed over to the Greens. A pre-recorded video address from Adam Bandt, parliamentary representative for the seat of Melbourne, was projected onto a large screen. Bandt declared that a “surge of public anger” would force the “old parties to stand up and listen.” Greens Senator Janet Rice also spoke, calling for students to vote for the Greens on the basis that her party would use its influence in the Senate to “stop even more brutal cuts under an Abbott government.”

In Sydney, Greens Senate candidate Cate Faehrmann was likewise provided a platform. She claimed that Labor could be pressured to reverse its cuts by “rally after rally”, and asserted that Greens parliamentarians would “not be supporting any legislation that enables cuts to higher education.” In fact, the government does not require the Greens’ votes to pass the cutbacks, as Gillard enjoys the backing of the opposition coalition—conveniently allowing the Greens to posture as opponents of the measures. Moreover, the Greens are responsible for every aspect of the minority Gillard government’s pro-market agenda, having pledged to prop it up in parliament and support its annual budgets.

An air of desperation marked the statements by the union officials and Greens. Immense anger is building up in the working class and among students over the extent of inequality in education. The unions are no longer regarded by ordinary workers as organisations that in any way defend their interests. At the same time, the Greens’ phony anti-establishment credentials have been widely discredited by their alliance with Gillard.

The middle class pseudo-left organisations play a key role in channelling this mounting discontent back behind the old union apparatuses and parliamentary parties. At yesterday’s rallies, these groupings went along with the NUS and NTEU promotion of the Labor Party and the Greens. In Melbourne, Socialist Alternative’s Liam Ward was invited by the NUS to address the protest. Identifying himself only as an NTEU member, Ward engaged in empty demagoguery against the mining companies and the two major parties, but remained silent on the role of the Greens and the unions.

SEP candidates and IYSSE representatives were bureaucratically blocked by the NUS and NTEU from addressing the rallies in both Melbourne and Sydney.

In Melbourne, Clare Keyes-Liley, NUS National Education Officer and a member of the Labor Party, refused to allow Patrick O’Connor, SEP candidate for the Senate in

Victoria, or IYSSE convenor in Melbourne, Will Morrow, to speak. Despite receiving a written request to speak several days earlier, she absurdly insisted that she had needed it earlier and sent to her personal email address. She then blurted out the real reason for the censorship when she said that the NUS had been “really pissed off about what you guys said at the last rally”, referring to Morrow’s exposure of the Greens’ Adam Bandt and the role played by the NUS and NTEU at a protest on April 17. (See: “IYSSE challenges unions, Greens at Australian student protests”)

The NTEU official presiding over the Sydney rally, Genevieve Kelly, told Zac Hambides that he would be able to address the audience as part of a “speak-out.” However, no such speak-out took place. Instead the rally was closed down immediately after statements by four union officials and a Greens candidate to prevent the SEP from speaking.

In both Sydney and Melbourne, the actions of the rally organisers were aimed at preventing the SEP candidates from advancing an alternative socialist perspective and from once again exposing the complicity of the NUS, NTEU, and the Greens in the Labor government’s pro-business assault on public education. The opposition of the union and student leaderships to any democratic debate reflects a growing recognition that their apologetics for Labor and their promotion of impotent protest politics are holding less and less sway over the broad mass of education workers and students.

As part of our 2013 election campaign, the SEP and IYSSE are calling for the struggle against Labor’s education budget cuts to be developed through a conscious political rebellion against the trade unions and the NUS. Committees of students and staff should be formed on the universities in order to develop an independent political and industrial campaign, coordinated with school and TAFE teachers and students who are also enduring the consequences of Gillard’s restructuring. The entire agenda of war and austerity must be rejected, and the struggle developed throughout the working class for a workers’ government, based on socialist and internationalist policies.

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