

SEP/IYSSE challenges Greens at education rallies

Our reporters
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Rallies and strikes were held yesterday at universities across Australia to protest the Labor government's \$2.5 billion university funding cuts, announced in April. The "day of action," however, was organised by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and National Union of Students (NUS) to promote the Greens' federal election campaign and head off any struggle by students and university staff against the Greens-backed minority Labor government.

In Melbourne 1,000 university and high school students and university employees rallied in central Melbourne and marched to the offices of higher education minister Kim Carr, where a large number of police aggressively confronted several students. In Sydney, up to 150 university staff and students briefly rallied at University Technology Sydney (UTS), before marching to Town Hall. At the University of Melbourne and University of Sydney, academic staff took 24-hour strike action over enterprise agreements. About 200 people rallied in Perth and 40 in Brisbane.

As happened at the previous NUS-NTEU protest organised against the budget cuts (see "University students and staff demonstrate against Labor's education cuts"), the organisers blocked members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) from speaking, but provided a platform for Greens' parliamentarians to fraudulently pose as defenders of public education and students' interests. In Sydney, Greens' Senator Lee Rhiannon was the featured speaker, in Perth Senator Scott Ludlam addressed the protest, and in Melbourne the Greens' deputy leader and sole lower house MP Adam Bandt spoke.

SEP candidates challenged the unions' promotion of the Greens. In Melbourne, Patrick O'Connor, Senate candidate for Victoria, and other SEP members interjected during Bandt's speech. The Greens' MP, who has provided crucial parliamentary support for the minority government over the past three years through the Greens' de facto coalition agreement with the Labor Party, hypocritically spoke about university education becoming the preserve of those who could afford to pay for it. He called for increased university and education funding, and advocated lifting the rate of Youth Allowance for university students. O'Connor called out: "You have voted for every budget brought down by this government—you voted for the cuts!"

Bandt made no attempt to reply, and went on to claim that the campaign being waged by the NUS and NTEU would see the education cuts rescinded in the next budget. "That's a lie,"

O'Connor responded. "Why don't you tell us why you have propped up this government in parliament for the last three years and voted for its budget cuts? What a fraud!"

A Bandt campaigner challenged O'Connor, objecting that the education cuts were "just one budget issue" and insisting that it was impermissible to trigger the "fall of the government over one policy issue." The remarks underscored the Greens' complicity in the Labor government's right-wing, pro-business policies, as well as the minor party's overriding concern to ensure continued "parliamentary stability."

The SEP's challenge to Bandt's posturing clearly worried the union organisers of the rally. NTEU Jeannie Rea national president spoke after the Greens' MP and declared that students and academic staff "can't rely on political parties, or governments." She did not mention the Greens in her remarks, despite her union committing \$1 million to back their election campaign. A glossy NTEU leaflet distributed at the rally featured a call to "Vote 1 Adam Bandt for Melbourne." Rea only indirectly urged a Labor-Greens vote by promoting "lesser evilism"—she declared that a Liberal-National coalition election victory would mark "a very dangerous situation."

The pseudo-left groups, that have played an important role in providing the Greens with a platform throughout the protests against the university cuts, then intervened. Socialist Alternative member Liam Ward spoke from the platform, introduced as a "radical NTEU member." He effectively covered up for Bandt by resorting to "no politics" demagoguery. "I am not going to bore you with points about legislation," he declared in his brief remarks, "I'm not going to tell you about [election] preference deals or economics. I'm just going to tell you one thing, tell you clear—four words—we have had enough."

The desperation of the NTEU and NUS, backed by the pseudo-left organisations, to prevent any critical assessment of the Greens and their own collaboration with the Labor government was also on display in Sydney.

SEP Senate candidate and IYSSE coordinator Zac Hambides was blocked from speaking by Omar Hassan of the NUS, also a Socialist Alternative member, and Genevieve Kelly, New South Wales secretary of the NTEU. Hassan declared that Hambides had not been involved in the campaign against the cuts and so would not be allowed to speak. An SEP member objected to this political censorship, with the NTEU providing a platform to promote the Greens, and by extension the Labor government. "They're not

doing a perfect job, but they're actually involved in the campaign," Hassan replied.

The rally was then addressed by the Greens' Lee Rhiannon and NTEU general secretary Grahame McCulloch, who stated: "While we condemn the Labor Party for these cuts, be under no illusion as we face a federal election that if Tony Abbott wins government, and particularly if he wins control of the Senate, the scale of the cuts and the burden that will be borne by students will be deeper again."

Speakers from the NUS limited their remarks to demagogic sloganeering and chants.

SEP and IYSSE members distributed a statement at each event across Australia, calling on students and university staff to support the SEP's election campaign and take up the fight to unify the working class on a socialist program, as the only viable perspective for the defence of public education. "The International Youth and Students for Social Equality insists that it is impossible to wage any genuine struggle in defence of public education outside of a complete break with the unions and the formation of rank-and-file committees that will unite staff and students and turn to other layers of the working class, on the basis of a political fight for a workers' government and socialist policies," the statement explained.

WSWS reporters interviewed several people attending the rallies in Melbourne and Sydney.

Sagar, a political philosophy researcher at the University of Melbourne, said he was concerned about the high levels of staff casualisation. "I received a research grant from an external organisation but the grant is provided to the university," he explained. "Although it's for three years, I have no formal contract but go from timesheet to timesheet. The university could choose at any time to get rid of me and use the grant funding for someone else.

"There's a lot of teaching done by casual sessional staff, because it's cheaper. There's no money made available for permanent lecturing positions. Instead sessional staff are hired for short periods to do the same job for less pay... The attacks on teaching are international. Governments are spending less on education. There is a need for an internationalisation of the struggle."

Ben, a University of Melbourne PhD student and casual tutor, said: "I've worked as a casual tutor since 2005. There are lots of people who do a few hours a week and have another job on the side. You used to get paid to go to lectures and for consultations, but now you're not, so it's really two hours less pay per week." He said that few casual staff members were involved in the NTEU's campaigns. "I went to an NTEU meeting and I was the only casual staff member there."

Jon, a Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) administrative worker, said, "There's been many gradual cuts. I hate the Gonski [secondary school] reforms. Last week they removed funding guarantees for migrant students." He explained that he was one of few staff members on permanent positions: "I've worked there for seven years. It's really difficult to move across to any other position in education. Every time you find a position, it's a fixed-term contract or casual. There was one permanent position I applied for recently. Out of two positions,

there were 300 applications."

Asked to comment on the Greens' backing for Labor's attacks on education over the past three years, Jon said: "Yeah, that [the minority-government deal between Labor and the Greens] wasn't good. Now the Greens have become quite a conservative force. It's like with Labor—they've become the same as the Liberals."

Ryan, a 19-year-old RMIT international studies student, said: "It's going to be harder with these cuts. This will be detrimental for future generations. What's a society without education?" Commenting on the federal election, he added: "I was all for Labor before the cuts and the recent Papua New Guinea refugee policy, but I won't be voting for a party that's doing that. I'm not going to vote for either of the two major parties."

Freya, also from RMIT said: "It's like the United States or the UK. I don't know why we want to go down that path. Education is expensive. Big business doesn't want to pay. It is as simple as that."

In Sydney, **Aislyn**, a first-year physics student at UTS, said: "I think the cuts are quite atrocious, because it's cutting everyone's futures. There's children out there today who when they see these cuts are going to think, well what's the point? And for people who are already in this situation and who don't necessarily have the money to pay for their own education, we're just going to be kicked out..."

"Look at the American system, where students end up with huge student loans. At least with HECS [Higher Education Contribution Scheme] we can pay it off when we make a certain amount. In the US, they have to pay it back instantly, so there are students who are working 2-3 jobs on top of their education just to survive and that's ridiculous..."

"I can barely afford my own education. I support myself. I live away from my parents and I can barely afford to do so. I do it so I can go to university, even if that means travelling three hours every day to get to university. If these cuts go through that's it, I'm gone. I'll have to stop my education and find a full-time entry level job. It's that simple. I've supported myself since I was 14. I got my first job at 14, not because my parents made me, but we were too broke to do anything else. Because we grew up in Mount Druitt, we had no money!"

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