

Australian student union's "Day of Action" promotes Labor and the Greens

Our correspondents
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Rallies against higher education spending cuts were held by the National Union of Students (NUS) at university campuses in major cities across Australia on Wednesday. In its last budget, the former Greens-backed Labor government slashed spending by \$2.3 billion, and these cuts are now being implemented through "efficiency dividends" at every campus. La Trobe University in Melbourne indicated last month that \$65 million will be shaved from their budget through the elimination of 15 percent of full-time staff, or 350 positions.

Further cuts have been foreshadowed by the present Liberal-National government. There is widespread opposition among students to the attacks on education. The purpose of the NUS rallies, however, was to promote the fraudulent claim that Labor and the Greens represent an alternative to the Abbott government, and that protests alone will be sufficient to reverse the austerity agenda of the entire political establishment.

The rally in Sydney was chaired by Chloe Rafferty, the NUS education officer for New South Wales, while the Melbourne event was chaired by Sarah Garnham, national education officer for the NUS. Both are members of the pseudo-left organisation Socialist Alternative. Neither of them mentioned the record of the former minority Labor government, which implemented the cuts before being thrown out of office in the September 2013 election. Labor, propped up by the Greens, also presided over the destruction of courses, departments and hundreds of permanent positions at universities across the country.

Garnham summed up the perspective of the NUS and the pseudo-left groups. She told the Melbourne rally: "There have to be more demonstrations, more occupations of our campuses, until we get this Abbott government out." While she did not spell it out explicitly, her comment underscored the fact that for all their rhetoric about "struggle," and "militancy," the perspective of Socialist Alternative is the return of a

Labor-Greens government.

The friendly division of labour between Socialist Alternative and Labor Party factions in the NUS was underscored by the fact that Garnham and Rafferty both spoke alongside prominent representatives of Young Labor and did not voice any objections to their comments.

At the Sydney demonstration, Billy Bruffey, a member of Young Labor, and education officer for the Student Representative Council at the University of New South Wales, denounced "heartless university administrators" and the Abbott government for slashing education funding. He acknowledged that Labor had introduced the latest cuts, but lyingly claimed that the next Labor government would reverse them.

Deanna Taylor, the NUS national president and a leading figure in Young Labor, struck a similar note at the Melbourne rally. In comments she made to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Taylor attempted to promote the Labor Party's phony opposition to the university funding cuts on the grounds that Abbott was backing away from the so-called "Gonksi model" for education funding. The Labor government justified cuts to university spending as a "saving" that would be allocated to primary and high schools on the basis of plans drawn up by business figure David Gonski. The aim of the "Gonski model" is to entrench the funding disparity between public and private schools and extend the use of performance ranking systems to justify the closure of schools and sacking of teachers.

Greens senator-elect Janet Rice was provided a platform to posture as a defender of education at the Melbourne rally. Rice promoted the fraud that the Labor Party had adopted a principled opposition to the cuts. Labor's "backflip," however, is nothing more than a cynical electoral ploy to distance itself from the very measures that it introduced.

Rice concluded with an appeal for electoral support,

making clear the sole purpose of the rallies was to channel students into supporting the return of a Greens-backed Labor government “There are setbacks from time to time”, she declared. “This government is one of them. Get angry, get determined, we can turf them out in two-and-a-half years’ time. I look forward to working with you on the campaign trail.”

That broad layers of the student population view the protest politics of the NUS as unserious was reflected in a low turnout. According to the NUS, as few as 1,500 students participated in the protests nationally.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) campaigned among those students attending the rallies, encouraging them to reject protest politics and oppose the promotion of Labor and the Greens by the NUS and the pseudo-left. The reality is that protests alone will not stem the attacks on education. They are being driven by the demands of the financial and corporate elite that the working class pays, through the destruction of its living standards, for the failure and breakdown of the capitalist profit system since 2008.

The assault on public education has been a central component of the austerity agenda implemented by governments across Europe and in the United States. In Greece, 10 percent of universities and 20 percent of technical colleges have been shut, along with 129 university and college departments. In Britain, annual tuition fees have been trebled to £9,000. In the United States, students graduate with an average college debt of \$29,400 and have little to no prospect of finding decent-paid work or ever paying off their loans.

In Australia, the latest cutbacks build on a decades-long assault on tertiary education. The Hawke Labor government introduced the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) in 1989, establishing the framework under which successive Labor and Liberal governments have drastically increased university fees. The initial fee of \$250 grew to \$1,800 per year for all students and has now exploded to over \$10,000 for medicine, \$8,600 for science and more than \$6,000 for humanities. After graduation, students are burdened with thousands of dollars in debt and face the prospect they will not find permanent work in their area of study. Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges have been savaged by budget cuts and student fees vastly increased.

The IYSSE, which is fighting to turn students and youth toward the working class and the development of a political struggle for a socialist and internationalist

program, spoke with a range of students at the Sydney and Melbourne rallies.

Jethro, who is studying to be an ancient history and visual arts teacher at a private Catholic university said: “I’m afraid that further cuts to education will mean that fees go up and people won’t be able to go to university because they can’t afford it. It will definitely build a bigger divide between the classes, because the people who can pay to go to university will be able to get better jobs and have a better future for their families than the people who can’t.”

Xiao, a first year, international student from China, commented: “I’m really surprised that the government is cutting education. I know that as an international student I pay a lot so I don’t know why the government needs to make cuts.” She noted that despite the high fees paid by international students—between \$30,000 and \$40,000 a year at campuses like the University of Sydney—they are denied travel concessions and that high rents force many to live in overcrowded conditions.

Maddy, who studies at TAFE in Footscray, a working class suburb of Melbourne, said: “The TAFE cuts from 2012 affected me. It has cut course content and teachers are leaving because they don’t have any job security. We have to pay an out-of-pocket amenities fee each year. I’ve paid \$800 so far. I’m studying community services, and because of the cuts, my TAFE has shut down the office desk for my course, and the student information office is really crowded all the time. Lots of students are migrants or refugees, and they have real trouble finding out information.

“It’s not just education that’s being cut. We’re seeing everything, from welfare to refugee rights, being attacked. We need more money in education. The cuts affect not just the young people and students today, but an entire generation. It entrenches poverty. It affects the poorest students the most and stops them from getting an education. It’s fundamentally wrong because being educated is a fundamental right.”



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