Australia: The politics of Socialist Alternative's protest on ABC's "Q&A"

Zac Hambides
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A group of students from the pseudo-left organisation Socialist Alternative staged a protest during a broadcast of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) "Q&A" program on May 5. The incident provided a foretaste of the diversionary and politically dishonest campaigns that will be organised by the Australian pseudo-left, as the austerity policies contained in tonight's federal budget are implemented against the working class.

"Q&A" is a live-to-air television program in which political and social issues are ostensibly debated in front of ordinary people. It features a guest panel of "experts" who discuss vetted questions from an equally vetted audience. The May 5 panel included Christopher Pyne, the education minister in the Liberal-National coalition government, and Anna Burke, a Labor MP and the parliamentary speaker under the previous Labor government. Pyne's presence ensured that the major issue was the government's agenda for the university system.

Students are currently charged between $6,000 and $10,000 in deferred fees per year, depending on what they are studying, and must begin repaying their debt on graduation once they earn an income of $53,345 or more. Corporate think tanks are calling for the drastic lowering of the income threshold for repayment of accrued Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) debt. University managements are calling for the deregulation of fees, to allow them to charge domestic students the same outrageous sums as international students. At high-profile institutions such as the University of Sydney, this is more than $30,000 per year. Pyne has indicated that the Abbott government is considering introducing both measures.

Ridah Hassan, a member of Socialist Alternative who holds a position on the University of Sydney's Student Representative Council, was among those in the studio audience selected to ask a question. After a short speech, she accused Pyne of wanting a "US-style two-tier system," in which elite universities were "populated by rich students" while other youth were "funnelled" into colleges "which offer lesser qualifications." She asked: "How can you defend the deregulation of fees, turning universities more into businesses than providers of education for all?"

Before Pyne could answer, a group of Socialist Alternative members and supporters stood up, unfurled a banner and started chanting "No cuts! No fees! No corporate universities!" and "Chris Pyne get out! We know what you're all about!" After a minute or so, during which the program's presenter demanded they sit down, the ABC cut off the broadcast until the protestors were escorted out of the venue by security guards.

The political purpose of the protest is clear from the fact that Socialist Alternative did not wait for Pyne to answer and made no criticism of the Labor Party. Socialist Alternative was not interested in provoking a serious discussion about the running down of university education under both Labor and Coalition governments. The reverse was the case. The protest was a publicity stunt aimed at enhancing the image of Socialist Alternative, particularly among students, and channeling their anger into the return of another Labor-Greens government. The pseudo-lefts as a whole are seeking to whitewash the record of the previous Rudd and Gillard governments in order to breathe life into the lie that Labor and the Greens are a "lesser evil" compared with the Coalition.

The attack on university education, for example, is presented by Socialist Alternative as purely the outcome of the "neoliberal" ideology of the

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conservative Liberal Party and individuals like Pyne. An April 28 article in Socialist Alternative's *Red Flag* by Sarah Garnham, a member of the group who is also education officer in the National Union of Students (NUS), was entitled "Don't let the Libs destroy our unis."

In reality, the Labor government established the framework for the Abbott's government's deepening of the assault on university education. Under Julia Gillard's "education revolution," Labor introduced a so-called competitive market by removing the caps on student enrolments. This sent class sizes soaring at chronically under-funded universities, while allowing prestigious universities to offer more placements and take numbers from lower-rated institutions. In 2012–13, Labor imposed a $2.3 billion cutback to tertiary education, forcing universities to axe staff and courses and seek greater corporate sponsorship. Labor also commissioned studies into how to increase the rate of HECS repayments.

Had Labor won last September's federal election, it would be implementing similar austerity measures to the Abbott government. The call by eight elite universities for the ability to dramatically increase HECS fees follows logically from Labor's introduction of a competitive market for students.

Socialist Alternative does not want such facts examined. In everything it says and does about the Abbott government's austerity measures, its primary concern is to re-direct popular opposition back under the wing of the Labor Party and the Greens.

Socialist Alternative is actively promoting "March Australia" protests, which will be held in Sydney and other cities on May 18. As was the case with earlier demonstrations in March, the rallies will be confined to denunciations of the Liberals, with implicit support for Labor. The group is also promoting similar NUS "Day of Action" protests on May 21.

The last NUS student rally was chaired in Melbourne by Socialist Alternative's Sarah Garnham. She provided a platform for Greens senator-elect Janet Rice to call on students to return Labor and the Greens to power. After railing against the Liberal government, Rice declared: "I look forward to working with you on the campaign trail." Neither Garnham nor any other pseudo-left objected, as this is their perspective as well.

The role played by Socialist Alternative and the pseudo-left in Australia is no different to that of similar tendencies in Europe. Mass opposition to austerity has been channelled into protests and strikes whose perspective has been either to appeal to governments for restraint, or to promote electoral support for openly capitalist parties such as SYRIZA in Greece. As a result, the ruling elite has been given a free rein to impose the full burden of the global capitalist crisis onto the working class.

As devastating austerity measures are implemented, the central problem that confronts the working class is political leadership and perspective. No social right, from university education, through to health care and wages and working conditions, can be defended through the Labor and trade union organisations and without a conscious struggle against the capitalist system. The Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Socialist Equality are engaged in a political fight against the entire political establishment to educate and independently mobilise the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program. Socialist Alternative's stunt has again underscored that it is organically opposed to such a perspective.

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