Thousands march in Australian cities against budget

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Thousands of people attended "March Australia" rallies on Sunday to protest against the harsh budget measures announced last week by the Liberal-National government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott. Some 10,000 marched in Sydney, up to 7,000 in Adelaide, similar numbers in Melbourne and 1,500 in Perth. Some 500 people rallied in Brisbane and Hobart.

Some of the hand-made placards reflected the widespread shock over the budget's attacks on the unemployed and students, the introduction of up-front payments to see a doctor and the increase in the retirement age to 70. A doctor carried a sign stating "I am a GP not a tax collector." Another read "Tax Wealth not Health." Some signs condemned the budget's attack on the most vulnerable sections of society: "Taking from the Needy to give to the Greedy" and "Stop the War on the Poor." Others denounced Abbott and the Liberal government as liars, for having broken promises before the last election not to raise taxes or cut health and education.

Numbers of people used the rally to protest over environmental issues, such as the dumping of dredge spoil in the Great Barrier Reef, the culling of sharks and the fracking of land to extract coal seam gas.

The march organisers, who held earlier anti-Abbott protests in March, claimed that they were not or promoting any political party or agenda. The speeches, however, presented a definite political perspective—that of the Greens and pseudo-left organisations, including Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance.

The speakers in Sydney were a representative of Greenpeace, a member of the pseudo-left group Solidarity who heads a refugee advocacy collective, a trade union official, a long-time Aboriginal activist, and pro-Greens media commentator Antony Loewenstein. The event was chaired by writer Van Badham, whose railings against Abbott were a reprise of her days as an "anarchist" student politician in the 1990s.

In Perth, the chair was Socialist Alliance member Alex Bainbridge. The National Union of Students speaker was Emma Norton of Socialist Alternative. In Melbourne, the flimsy façade of "no politics" was cast aside altogether and Greens' deputy leader Adam Bandt invited to address the rally.

For all the sound, fury and even personal abuse directed toward Abbott, Treasurer Joe Hockey and the Liberal Party as a whole, the speeches were aimed at obscuring the political issues that face the working class.

No mention was made of the global economic turmoil since the 2008 financial meltdown or of the devastating austerity measures that governments have inflicted on workers in the United States and Europe. No one explained that the previous Greens-backed Labor government had laid the foundations for the Abbott government's budget. Some speakers made critical remarks about Labor, but largely to encourage the notion that it still represented the "lesser evil"—whatever Labor had done, Abbott was worse.

Underpinning the speeches was the argument, put most openly by the Greens, that "there is no budget emergency." According to the Greens, the cuts are simply the outcome of the right-wing ideological positions held by Abbott and his ministers. They cite the relatively low level of public debt in Australia compared with the US and Europe as proof that austerity is unnecessary.

In fact, both the Coalition government, and the previous Labor government, have imposed spending cuts to meet the demands of the financial elite for corporate and high income taxes to be slashed to the level of their rivals internationally. Such tax cuts can

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only be financed through the destruction of what remains of the social welfare state. The turn to budget austerity is being paralleled by intensified job destruction and wage cutting.

No country is immune from the global dictates of transnational corporations. The drive for the drastic lowering of wages, working conditions and social services is not the outcome of deranged thinking, but the systemic failure of world capitalism and the ruthless struggle between rival sections of finance capital for markets and profits.

At Sunday's rallies, however, the words "capitalism", "banks" and "finance capital" were scarcely heard. While some speakers denounced the government for spending $12 billion on F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, the support of the political establishment for the provocative US "pivot to Asia" and its war preparations against China were not mentioned.

When all was said and done, the March Australia speakers promoted the complacent outlook of a privileged middle-class layer and sought to steer the opposition to the budget into safe parliamentary channels. Their perspective was to appeal to the Labor Party, the Greens and other minor parties to block the budget measures in the Senate, the upper house of parliament, in which the government does not have a majority.

In Perth, Socialist Alternative's Emma Norton declared: "I think the Greens and the Labor Party have made important steps forward in denouncing this budget, the harshest budget in generations... We need Labor and the Greens to retain the spine that it seems they have recently grown, and use every parliamentary and extra-parliamentary action to stop this budget from going through."

The prospect was held out that a parliamentary crisis over the budget could force Abbott to call an early election. The Greens' Adam Bandt told the Melbourne protest: "The Greens will block this budget. If Labor and the Palmer Party join with us in an alliance for a new election, we could have Tony Abbott out of office by Christmas."

Implicit in such statements is the position that the working class should support the return of a Greens-backed Labor government, barely eight months after an election in which anger toward Labor saw it receive its lowest vote as a percentage of the electorate in 110 years. The entire Green and pseudo-left milieu is doing all it can to confine the opposition to Liberals to this parliamentary dead-end. Further rallies will be called in the months ahead. One can predict that it will not be long before March Australia organisers invite Labor politicians onto the stage so they can fraudulently posture as opponents of austerity.

The sentiments of many of the rally's participants were well to the left of the organisers. Socialist Equality Party members engaged in discussions in which workers, professionals, students, single parents and aged pensioners who were grappling with the international dimensions of the assault on the working class. The bankruptcy of Detroit, the social devastation in Greece and the promotion of fascist tendencies in Ukraine were just some of the issues that people referred to. There was ready agreement that Labor and Liberal are both parties of the corporate elite and that the return of a Labor government would resolve nothing.

The crucial issue in fighting the devastating budget measures is the struggle for the political independence of the working class from Labor, the unions, the Greens and the entire political establishment, and the development of a movement for a workers' government and socialist policies. The SEP public meetings in June will be a forum to discuss the way forward for the working class to defend its fundamental rights.

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