

Australian students protest against Abbott government's budget

An IYSSE reporting team
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Thousands of students demonstrated across Australia yesterday to denounce the Abbott government's budget, released on May 13. Intensifying the previous Labor-Greens minority government's cuts to education and welfare, the budget constitutes a sweeping assault on students and the entire working class.

The Abbott government's first budget includes the deregulation of university student fees, which could rise in 2016 to more than \$30,000 a year. It also trebles the student debt interest rate to 6 percent, lowers the annual income threshold for mandatory debt repayments by \$3,000 to \$50,638, and scraps the "Tools for Trades" allowance for apprentices, compelling them to take out loans to cover their expenses.

In some of the largest student demonstrations in years, 4,000 marched in Sydney and 2,000 in Melbourne. About 500 protested in Brisbane and hundreds more in Canberra, Perth, Adelaide and Hobart. Almost every section of students was represented, from domestic and international university students, to Tertiary and Further Education (TAFE) and high-school students.

Many participants carried homemade banners reflecting their deep concerns. Slogans included: "Forever a loan," "Students are already poor enough" and "Will think for food." Others were: "Education for all! Not just for the wealthy," "No to tertiary deregulation!" and "Students can't afford Tony Abbott."

In Sydney, students assembled at the University of Technology, where speakers addressed the rally, then marched through the city to Town Hall, stopping traffic along the way. In Melbourne, students gathered at the State Library of Victoria to hear speakers, before marching to the state parliament. At one point, about 20

marchers sat down to block traffic on Bourke and Spring Streets.

Large detachments of police accompanied the marches, including a police helicopter and the Public Order and Riot Squad in Sydney. Two protesters were arrested in Sydney, while in Melbourne police teams physically removed the students who sat down, including a 15-year-old schoolgirl.

Members and supporters of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) distributed a statement, "A socialist perspective to fight Abbott's budget," in Sydney and Melbourne, which called for students to turn to the working class and fight for a socialist and international perspective.

Speaking in Sydney, IYSSE national coordinator Zac Hambides explained: "This budget is a fundamental assault on the working class, on education, welfare, pensions, jobs and wages. It is part of an international assault in the interests of the financial elite. Abbott, just like Gillard and Rudd before him, are carrying out their dictates. If the capitalist system cannot provide the youth with a future, then it and its political defenders must be swept away."

Hambides spoke in opposition to the rally organisers, the National Union of Students (NUS), and the pseudo-left group Socialist Alternative, who promoted the fraudulent claim that Labor and the Greens represent an alternative to the Coalition government. They whitewashed the record of both Labor and the Greens in preparing the conditions for the Abbott government's stepped-up assault on public education, while doing everything they could to block political discussion by resorting to personal invective and demagogic sloganeering.

Challenging this perspective, Hambides declared that "the NUS is hoping that students have developed mass

political amnesia” in calling for support for Labor and the Greens. “We say students must turn to the only social force that can oppose these cuts—that is the working class. The revival of a working class movement on the basis of a socialist, internationalist and revolutionary program is the only way in which these austerity cuts can be opposed.”

At this point, Andy Zephyr, head of the UTS SRC, attempted to cut Hambides off, but relented after students called for him to be allowed to conclude. Hambides denounced the fact that NUS had originally denied the IYSSE the right to speak as politically-motivated censorship, and called on students to attend the Socialist Equality Party’s public meeting against the budget cuts, on June 1.

In contrast to Hambides, none of the official speakers mentioned the role played by the Labor governments of Julia Gillard and Kevin Rudd in introducing major cuts to education, including a \$2.3 billion cut to higher education funding now being implemented by the Abbott government.

Chloe Rafferty, NSW Education officer of the NUS, and a member of the pseudo-left organisation, Socialist Alternative chaired the event. She claimed that the budget could only be fought through a revival of “union militancy.” This was in keeping with Socialist Alternative’s attempts to subordinate any movement of workers and young people to the thoroughly corporatised, pro-Labor union bureaucracy.

Referring to a number of “actions” over the past weeks in which Socialist Alternative members heckled Liberal Party politicians, Rafferty claimed that students had been “giving the Liberals hell wherever they go.” In reality, Socialist Alternative’s various stunts are an attempt to prevent any discussion of the political issues raised by the budget raises for young people and the working class as a whole, and to direct popular anger behind Labor and the Greens.

In Melbourne, this perspective was on open display. NUS education officer Sarah Garnham, a member of Socialist Alternative, chaired the Melbourne rally and provided a platform for Greens MP Adam Bandt and Labor’s Kate Ellis, the shadow education minister, while denying IYSSE members the right to speak.

Ellis, representing the party that just 12 months ago handed down a budget that slashed \$2.3 billion from university education, after earlier imposing a

“competitive market” for student enrolments, was allowed to posture as a defender of education rights. Labor, she declared, would “absolutely vote against these cuts to university funding.”

A group of students, angered by the sheer cynicism of Ellis’s presence, shouted “No Labor!” In response, members of Young Labor and the RMIT University student union, who formed a cordon around Ellis, repeatedly yelled “Shut the f*ck up!” to try to intimidate dissent.

On behalf of the Greens, Bandt promoted the illusion that students and youth could rely on the Greens, Labor and the right-wing populist Palmer United Party to “work together” to block cuts in the Senate. Bandt declared that through parliament, “we can sink Tony Abbott back to where he came from and have a new prime minister by Christmas.” The sole aim of the Greens is to regain their access to the corridors of power through the return of a Labor government that they could once again prop up.

In closing the rally, Garnham made it plain that the NUS and Socialist Alternative will seek to corral students, youth and the working class behind the prospect of returning such a government. “I think it’s pretty important that right here on this stage we’ve heard from both the Greens and the Labor Party that they will be blocking the Abbott government’s [cuts],” she said. “But we need to hold them to that. We know that we cannot rely on our politicians. To hold them to that, to chuck the budget out, to burn it to the ground, to see this government gone by Christmas, we need to keep on protesting.”

In other words, as far as the Socialist Alternative is concerned, the only alternative to the Coalition government is the return of Labor and the Greens, which will maintain and intensify the austerity agenda, including against students and youth.



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