

Fight budget austerity! A socialist perspective for Australian workers

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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This leaflet was distributed at trade union “Bust the Budget” rallies in Sydney and Melbourne.

Today’s “Bust the Budget” events in Sydney and Melbourne, convened by Unions NSW and the Victorian Trades Hall Council more than four weeks after Treasurer Joe Hockey brought down the budget, are not aimed at mobilising any fight back against austerity.

Instead, their purpose is to channel the enormous anger over the budget back behind the return of a Labor-Greens government—in other words, the same kind of pro-business, anti-working class administration that paved the way for Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s Liberal-National government in the first place.

Like the austerity measures that have been implemented by governments in the US and throughout Europe in the wake of the global financial crisis that erupted in 2008, Abbott’s budget is a fundamental assault on the social position of the working class. It targets every layer of workers—including pensioners, students and working class youth—stripping millions of access to education, healthcare, welfare, as well as cutting jobs, wages and conditions.

The coalition government is implementing the agenda of finance capital, whose demand is nothing less than the total reversal of all the social gains won by the working class during the 20th century, in order to augment the obscene wealth of a global financial aristocracy.

Contrary to all official expectations, the initial opposition to the budget has only deepened as it becomes clear to broader layers of workers, students and youth that the budget’s central feature is a massive increase in social inequality.

But, as far as the trade union leadership is concerned, the purpose of today’s events is to divert opposition

back into the safe channels of parliament and the Labor Party, just as it did under the former conservative Prime Minister John Howard.

When Howard brought down his first budget in 1996, which contained unprecedented cuts to government spending on tertiary education, health, welfare and jobs, the union bureaucracy was already well entrenched as the chief mechanism for implementing the demands of big business against the working class.

Over the previous 13 years, the unions had worked with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments to enforce every dictate of the employers, under the banner of making Australian wages and conditions “internationally competitive” in the global market.

Eager to prove their credentials to the new government, the ACTU organised a rally in Canberra in response to Howard’s budget, aimed at dissipating broad hostility to the cuts and allowing Labor to posture as opponents of its measures. Unexpectedly, about 5,000 workers broke off from the rally and stormed parliament house, clashing with police.

Union bureaucrats, under the leadership of ACTU president Jennie George denounced the workers for carrying out “wanton violence and wanton destruction,” and declared that their “actions and behaviour had nothing to do with the mainstream of the union movement.” Aiding the police, who laid charges against workers, the ACTU demanded that the unions discipline and expel any members found guilty.

All anti-budget protests were wound down and replaced by “an ongoing community based campaign” to lobby Labor, Greens and Australian Democrat Senators to make minor modifications to the government’s Workplace Relations Bill. The ACTU even helped draft the final version.

Again, in the lead up to the 2007 federal election, the

unions sought to prevent mass opposition to Howard's pro-market, anti-working class policies from developing into an independent movement of the working class. Instead, they channelled workers' hostility into backing the election of Labor's Kevin Rudd. During the "Your Rights at Work" campaign, days lost to strikes fell to the lowest number in Australian history.

The resulting Rudd and Gillard governments not only retained all the anti-strike provisions of Howard's WorkChoices legislation in Labor's Fair Work laws—which were strictly enforced by every trade union—but also laid the groundwork for the measures in Abbott's budget. Labor cut off welfare payments to sole parents, slashed more than \$2 billion from tertiary education and, in 2012–13, carried out the largest ever reduction in government spending.

The pseudo-left tendencies, such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance, are attempting to obscure and conceal this history. According to Socialist Alternative's *Red Flag*, today's rallies "will be the most significant day so far in the campaign against the Abbott government's vicious budget." In the name of "resist the Liberals," it promotes the line that the alternative is the re-election of a Labor government. "Only a sustained campaign of protests and strikes" can "stop the Liberals," it states.

This is pure fiction. In Greece, the perspective of "a sustained campaign of protests and strikes" under the leadership of the unions and various fake-Left groups, such as SYRIZA (the Coalition of the Radical Left), has seen dozens of 24-hour strikes by workers cut short, called off and betrayed under the lie that austerity can be opposed by pressuring parliament and appealing to the European Union, the very organs responsible for carrying out the cuts.

As a result, since 2008 wages in Greece have been cut by 30 percent on average, unemployment has reached 27.5 percent, and 57 percent for youth, and public services such as health care and education have been gutted. This is the type of social counter-revolution now being brought forward in Australia, regardless of which parties of the parliamentary establishment are in office.

The historic assault on the working class, in Australia and worldwide, can be reversed only on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective aimed at

overthrowing the capitalist profit system itself. This requires a political break from the Labor and union bureaucracy and the formation of independent rank-and-file workers' organisations to fight for the establishment of a workers' government, committed to totally reorganising economic and social life to meet the needs of the majority, not boost the profits of a tiny minority.



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