

Australia: Student “day of action” over education cutbacks

An IYSSE reporting team
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About 700 students in Melbourne, 600 in Sydney and 200 in Newcastle joined a “national day of action” organised by the National Union of Students (NUS) yesterday over the federal government’s education cutbacks. Rallies were also held in Canberra, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth.

The low attendance did not reflect the widespread opposition among students and teachers, as well as working people more broadly, to the Abbott government’s budget. It not only slashes university funding and deregulates student fees, but amounts to a wholesale assault on the social rights of the working class.

The rallies revealed the dead-end perspective of the NUS and its political defenders in the pseudo-left groups. Their aim since the cuts were announced in May has been to deflect the opposition, promoting illusions in pressuring Labor and Greens to reverse the cuts to education.

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members and supporters distributed copies of the IYSSE statement “Fight cuts to education and the drive to war!” It documented the record of the previous Greens-backed Labor government in gutting university funding.

The rallies in Sydney and Melbourne were accompanied by a heavy police presence, including the Public Order, Riot Squad and mounted policemen. In Sydney, police provocatively filmed students as they marched from the University of Technology Sydney to Town Hall.

In Sydney, NUS representatives denied IYSSE members the right to address students, despite the IYSSE having requested speaking rights before the rallies. Instead, the platforms were turned over to Labor and Greens members.

In Melbourne and Newcastle, IYSSE speakers were able to address the rallies, defying anti-democratic attempts by rally organisers to drown them out with chants.

At the Melbourne rally, IYSSE member Will Morrow

said: “Labor and the Greens, no less than the Liberals, are the parties of the millionaires, multimillionaires and billionaires. They would today be advancing broadly the same agenda had they won the last election... Labor and the Greens already passed the appropriations bill in June to slash \$80 billion from health and education over the next decade.”

Morrow explained that the Australian government was spending \$300 million to “celebrate” the centenary of World War I, with the clear purpose of preparing to send a new generation to fight and die in the interests of the corporate and financial elite. “The IYSSE insists that the fight for decent, free education is inseparable from the fight to defend all the social interests of the working class, and the fight against imperialist war,” he said. “The fight against war and austerity is the fight against capitalism, the struggle for socialism.”

All the official speakers attributed the cuts to the ideology of Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Education Minister Christopher Pyne, covering up the underlying political issues raised by the global drive of capitalist governments to impose deep cuts to social spending.

Introducing Greens deputy leader Adam Bandt, NUS Education Officer Sarah Garnham, who is a member of the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative, tried to boost his credentials, saying: “He will tell you how the Greens plan to fight these attacks.”

Bandt declared: “The Greens stood with you when Labor proposed to cut \$2.3 billion from tertiary education. We fought that off.”

What a fraud! Bandt helped pass every one of the minority Gillard Labor government’s budgets, including its last one, which included the cuts to university funding. In addition, Gillard began the deregulation of fees by removing block funding from universities.

In Sydney, Greens Senator Lee Rhiannon said the task was to “kick out Abbott and Pyne,” in effect calling for

the reelection of a Greens-backed Labor government. Rhiannon urged students to put pressure on Labor and the right-wing populist Palmer United Party of mining mogul Clive Palmer “to stand together and stop the deregulation of fees.”

Rhiannon claimed that Labor’s verbal opposition to the \$2.3 billion in cuts that it introduced was a genuine about-face produced by public pressure. In fact, it is part of Labor’s bid to head off the hostility to the budget, and divert the outrage back into the parliamentary framework.

Chairing the rally, Chloe Rafferty, another NUS Education Officer and member of Socialist Alternative, expressed her agreement with Rhiannon, commenting: “We can win! I’d like to agree there, it is the pressure on the streets, it’s students coming out time and time again.”

IYSSE supporters spoke to some of those who attended the rallies.

Nat, a student at the University of Newcastle said: “These cuts did not just start with Abbott. All the official political parties have the same agenda. One government feeds on what was carried out by the previous one.

“I agree that these attacks on social conditions are being carried out on the demands of finance capital here and everywhere... While there is no money for education and social programs, billions are being spent on weapons and the military.”

Reflecting broad concerns among students over the police shooting in Ferguson, Missouri, Nat said: “What is happening there a shocking assault on the democratic rights of ordinary people. I must say it did not surprise me to see armoured cars and police with assault rifles being used against protesters. The militarisation of the police in the US has been going on now for a long time.”

“This not just happening in the US but in every country and also in Australia, where the police are being strengthened and given ever more powers... What is happening is bound up with the imposition of massive social inequality. With the wealth being concentrated at the top end of society, this requires military police and anti-democratic measures.”

Nat objected to the rally organisers trying to block IYSSE speakers. “It was undemocratic. I was trying to listen to what he [an IYSSE speaker] was saying and then they drowned him out. I believe it was to stop him criticising the Labor Party.”

Mary, another University of Newcastle student, commented: “It is not only university students who are being affected. Governments are also privatising TAFE [Technical and Further Education], cutting staff there and

increasing fees.

“If the budget cuts, such as the additional payment to see a doctor, the Medicare levy and the measures against unemployed people, go ahead, they will have a hard impact on the most disadvantaged and the most vulnerable in society... The Hawke-Keating Labor government began the attacks on education, ending free university education, reintroducing fees, and carrying out attacks on working people’s rights. It has continued ever since.”

Speaking on the police violence in Ferguson, Mary said: “The developments there reveal a society which is very volatile. What is happening in the US can happen here. There are growing tensions in society here also.”

High school student **Sophie** said: “Everyone should have the right to a proper education. I am concerned about the growing levels of social inequality, and the budget cuts will make the situation worse.

“If university fees continue to increase then students coming out of high school now will never have the opportunity to go to university... I am very worried about the future for young people and I am concerned about the attacks on the unemployed in the budget.”

Asked about the developments in Ferguson, Sophie said: “I am really shocked. It is terrible that the government is using such measures against peaceful protestors.”

In Melbourne, La Trobe University student **Natalie** said: “I think they should not take money away from healthcare and education. Students are the future of the nation. It is essential to have a good education. They shouldn’t be cutting the spending and giving it to the military.”

RMIT University student **Ramazan** commented: “The privileged will be able to study but the middle class and the working class will not be able to study, and their children will be affected as well. Even with the fees now, some people cannot afford to go to university. If they deregulate fees, corporations will run the universities and will make their fees higher, making it harder for poor people to go to university.”



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