

Australian budget protests: A political balance sheet

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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When brought down in May, the Abbott government's budget provoked an outpouring of opposition because it was understood that it would worsen the already obscene levels of social inequality. Its austerity cutbacks were rightly viewed as an escalation of the decades of attacks on the working class that have benefitted the corporate elite and the wealthy.

However, over the past three months, the political forces that have organised the various anti-budget protests have worked assiduously to channel this hostility and outrage into the dead-end of parliamentary manoeuvre, promoting the illusion that Labor and the Greens would block the budget measures.

What has taken place? On June 25, without any public fanfare, Labor and the Greens voted with the Coalition to pass the budget appropriation bills that impose \$80 billion in cuts to federal health and education funding, destroy thousands of public sector jobs and slash foreign aid, while boosting funds for the military and intelligence agencies. Defence spending is set to rise to \$27.6 billion by 2017–18, with some \$100 billion now committed by the present Coalition government or the previous Labor government to purchase warships, F-35 jet fighters and a new fleet of submarines.

With the appropriation bills safely in place, Abbott and his ministers are now asserting that they have "time" to get sufficient Senate votes to pass outstanding measures not due to come into effect until 2015 or later. Behind closed doors, negotiations are underway to impose regressive policies such as lifting the retirement age to 70, denying benefits to young unemployed, co-payments for medical services, slashing family tax benefits and the deregulation of university fees.

The Abbott government, in other words, is proceeding with its plans to "end the age of entitlement"—the phrase coined by Treasurer Joe Hockey to describe destroying what remains of the post-war social welfare state.

With virtually no public comment, moves have begun to privatise the processing of claims and payments paid under the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS), Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) and the war veteran benefits scheme. The state-owned insurer Medibank is being sold off later in the year. Since July 1, all unemployed under 60 can be forced into work-for-the-dole schemes. Disability pensioners under 35 and deemed capable of some degree of work will also be required to take part.

The stepped-up persecution of the unemployed and disabled takes place amid rising unemployment, with tens of thousands of jobs being eliminated in the public sector, Telstra, Qantas, the mining sector and the car and components industry. The real rate of unemployment and underemployment in Australia stands at close to 20 percent, according to Roy Morgan research.

As in every country, the working class is being made to pay for the economic breakdown of world capitalism that began in 2008. In numerous workplaces, workers are facing demands for pay freezes or outright wage cuts. Overall wages' growth is now below the rise in the cost-of-living and the lowest in 16 years. Millions of families live on the edge, barely able to meet their mortgage or rent payments and basic expenses. The banks, predictably, have all announced record profits, with the Commonwealth alone gouging out \$8.7 billion.

While the social crisis for the working class deepens, the chief concern of the political establishment was summed up by Greens' leader Christine Milne when she voted for Abbott's budget appropriation bills. "We are not going to cause a constitutional crisis" for the government, Milne said. Senator Penny Wong declared that passing the austerity budget was "consistent with [Labor's] longstanding principles."

Labor and the Greens have ensured that the government has not faced a budget crisis. They have also backed the

Abbott government as it has functioned as the adjunct for Washington's intrigues around the world—from its provocations against China, to its unproven accusations that Russia was responsible for the MH17 crash and its renewed military operations in Iraq and potentially Syria.

This bipartisanship is matched by their consensus in whipping up terror scares to give even more anti-democratic powers to the intelligence and police apparatuses. The imposition of de-facto martial law in Ferguson, Missouri this month, to suppress demonstrations against a police killing, was a warning to workers everywhere that police-state methods can and will be employed against political discontent.

Every attempt is being made to project class antagonisms outward through the promotion of militarism, including via the nationalist celebrations of World War I, and to sow social divisions by promoting xenophobia against immigrants and refugees.

The lack of any genuine struggle against the Abbott government is an indictment of the political organisations behind the various anti-budget protests since May. The thinly-veiled aim of the March Australia rallies, the trade union-sponsored demonstrations, the student union "days of action" and the pseudo-left organisations such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance has been to confine the opposition to the bankrupt perspective of electing a Greens-backed Labor government.

The record of the previous Labor government in initiating austerity policies being pursued by the Coalition has been suppressed. At event after event, speakers have insisted that the opposition parties could be relied upon to block the budget, even after Labor and the Greens voted for the appropriation bills. The right-wing populist Palmer United Party, whose Senator Jacqui Lambie calls for conscription and the doubling of military spending to prepare for war with China, has also been lauded at the protests.

The experience of the past three months demonstrates that the working class can only defend its interests by establishing its complete political independence from Labor, the Greens, the unions and the entire official establishment. Anger and protest are not sufficient. Workers and youth need a new political perspective and leadership that fights to mobilise the immense strength of the working class in Australia and internationally against the source of the social crisis—the capitalist profit system itself.

The standpoint of the unions and pseudo-left protest organisers is determined by their acceptance of capitalism

and the nation-state system. Under conditions of economic turmoil and the eruption of geo-political tensions, every defender of capitalism internationally is lining up with their own ruling class. They all agree that the working class must pay, through the slashing of its living standards and through wars for control of strategic regions, resources and markets.

In opposition to the entire political establishment, the Socialist Equality Party fights for a workers' government and socialist policies as part of an international struggle to end capitalism. The banks and major industries must be brought under public ownership and democratic control, and the obscene wealth monopolised by a minority of capitalist rich redistributed to end poverty and inequality.

To fight for a workers' government, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees in the workplaces, independent of the trade unions, to unite workers against the assault on jobs, wages and conditions. In the working-class suburbs, the SEP advocates the formation of action committees to take all necessary action to defend housing, health care, public education and social services.

Against the militarist agenda of the Australian establishment, the SEP calls for the repudiation of the US alliance, the closure of all American bases, the repeal of all anti-democratic, police-state legislation and reallocation of military spending to socially necessary purposes.

We urge all workers and students who agree with the fight for international socialism to apply to join the Socialist Equality Party.



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