

# Australian student union's phony "day of action"

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The so-called "day of action" by the National Union of Students (NUS) on October 16 at campuses in some capital cities was testimony to the political dead-end into which it has led students angered by the Abbott government's regressive plans for higher education.

The many protests organised by the NUS since the government's budget in May, have been aimed at promoting the fraud that the deregulation of, and cutbacks to, higher education can be opposed by pressuring Labor and the Greens to vote them down in the Senate.

In reality, both Labor and the Greens demonstrated their essential support for the budget's austerity measures immediately, passing the appropriations bills in the House of Representatives in June, which included \$80 billion of cuts to education and healthcare over the next decade.

The pitiful turn-out for the "day of action" was product of this bankrupt outlook. Declaring absurdly that its campaign had "almost won," the NUS deliberately wound back its action and did virtually nothing to publicise the rallies. At the University of Sydney, one of the country's largest campuses, around 50 people attended.

As at previous NUS protests, student leaders turned over the rally at the University of Sydney to the Greens, and supporters of the Labor Party, to fraudulently posture as defenders of education. Federal Greens Senator Lee Rhiannon presented the political horse-trading in the Senate as a defense of education. "Labor had been strong on this, they did reverse their position when they wanted to bring in their own cuts of \$2.3 billion," she declared.

Rhiannon was referring to the fact that just last year the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government, introduced \$2.3 billion of cuts to higher education. This

was part of a broader agenda that involved the introduction of a market-based funding system, resulting in the axing of hundreds of university jobs throughout the country, along with the closure of courses and entire faculties. Only after losing office in the 2013 federal elections did Labor claim to oppose the very cuts that they had introduced.

Rhiannon also promoted the right-wing populist Palmer United Party (PUP), founded by the billionaire mining magnate Clive Palmer, declaring it had "come into this parliament on a platform of free education." She called on students to lobby PUP representatives to oppose Abbott's education legislation in the Senate.

Pseudo-left organisations such as Socialist Alternative, whose members occupy key positions in the national leadership of the NUS, have played a critical role in promoting the fraud that the parties of big business can be pressured to oppose the assault on education that they themselves are responsible for.

Socialist Alternative member April Holcombe expressed support for Rhiannon's remarks, declaring: "We've almost won, the Senate looks pretty strong in blocking, but as Lee said they are not all particularly reliable so putting pressure from the ground up, that's the way we are going to stop this and stop all the other attacks."

In reality, the NUS and its pseudo-left supporters are promoting the lie that the attacks on education are all but defeated, right at the point that the Abbott government is engaged in backroom negotiations with Labor, the Greens, PUP and other crossbench Senators to push through the essentials of its education legislation.

To this end, the Senate has just concluded an inquiry into the proposed education legislation, at which organisations such as the Business Council of

Australia, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Group of 8, which represents the country's "elite" universities, called on the government to press ahead with fee deregulation that would greatly increase the cost of degrees for students.

Last week, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the Abbott government had indicated a willingness, behind the scenes, to reach "compromises" with various cross-benchers in the Senate so long as the fundamentals of the new education legislation, including fee deregulation, is pushed through.

In its submission to the Senate committee, the NUS declared that the union was "not opposed to every measure in the bill," but was in favor of amendments that would remove aspects of the bill that "will not serve the long-term interests of Australia" such as outright fee deregulation. It called on the government to "retain a cap on student contribution rates."

Within this narrow framework, students will lose both ways. If fee deregulation is accepted, degree costs will soar. If the NUS gets its "victory" and higher fees are blocked, the results will be just as devastating. As university administrations have already made clear, given the cutbacks to public funding, the only way they can make ends meet is by cutting costs—that is, jobs, courses and services.

In April, University of New South Wales Vice-Chancellor Fred Hilmer wrote an article stating that tertiary education, as it currently exists, is "not sustainable." He noted that, "Funding per student is declining and has been for 30 years."

The NUS covers up the fact that the measures contained in the Abbott government's budget, including fee deregulation, and higher interest rates on Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) government loans, are a continuation of a bipartisan assault on education that has been implemented by successive governments, Labor and Liberal alike.

It was under the Labor governments of Hawke and Keating that fees were introduced, beginning with the dismantling of tertiary education, which was continued over the ensuing decades, with successive governments implementing major fee hikes. It was the previous Greens-backed Gillard Labor government that paved the way for fee deregulation, lifting enrollment caps to create a "competitive market" for student placements.

Under conditions of global capitalist breakdown,

governments internationally are implementing an agenda of austerity that means a relentless assault on public education and all the social rights of the working class. Students can only fight for their right to free, high-quality education by turning to the working class on the basis of a political struggle for a workers' government and socialist policies. The banks and the major corporations must be placed under public ownership and democratic control to pour billions of dollars into essential social services including education.



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