

## Australian university student protests

# A socialist perspective to fight the government assault on education and the drive to war

The IYSSE (Australia)  
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The Liberal-National federal budget marks a continuation of the bipartisan offensive against the social rights of workers and young people. Building upon decades of cuts to education, and huge increases in military spending by successive Labor and Coalition governments, it underscores the fact that the capitalist political establishment has nothing to offer young people, except a future of war and austerity.

For university students, the budget will:

- \* Increase university fees by 7.5 percent within five years
- \* Force universities to deliver another 2.5 percent “efficiency dividend” and compel already corporatized universities to compete for more business sponsorship and funding
- \* Lower the income threshold for HECS loan repayments to an annual wage of \$42,000 a year
- \* Force most permanent residents, including New Zealand citizens, to pay exorbitant international fees in full

These policies are the Turnbull government’s response to the demands of the corporate and financial elite to slash public spending and reduce university enrolments by placing ever greater costs on students.

The cuts to education go hand-in-hand with a broader offensive against the working class, targeting, in particular, the unemployed and welfare recipients. This includes the introduction of an arbitrary, anti-democratic drug-testing regime, aimed at stigmatising young people and blaming them for the social ills created by the ruling elite itself. In typical dog-whistle fashion, the government is also targeting foreign workers.

Once again, the lie is being advanced that “there is no money” to pay for essential social services. Money has been readily found, however, to provide tax cuts to the major corporations, and to squander \$150 billion over the next four years—and \$494 billion over the next decade—on the armed forces. The build-up of the military is openly aimed at ensuring Australia’s war-readiness for further crimes in the Middle East and, most dangerously, to participate in steadily mounting US pressure and threats against North Korea and China, which could escalate into conflict and nuclear war.

The Labor Party has denounced the budget as a “war on

young people,” and claims to stand for “fairness.” What a fraud! A version of every measure handed down in last week’s budget—from obscene levels of military spending, to scapegoating youth and savage cuts to education, health care and welfare—has been handed down before by Labor governments.

Students throughout the country are deeply opposed to the cuts, and to boosting the military for war. But the issue is: how to fight? What political perspective is needed to build a genuine mass movement against austerity and war?

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) fights for a revolutionary socialist and internationalist program, oriented to the working class and opposed to the entire political establishment—including Labor, the Liberal-Nationals and the Greens.

We insist that the only way to defend fundamental social rights, including free, high-quality public education for all, from kindergarten to university, is through the mobilisation of the working class and youth against the capitalist profit system itself. It is the drive for unending profits by a tiny privileged layer that has spurred the unprecedented growth in social inequality—not only in Australia, but around the globe. A system that enables the eight richest billionaires in the world to amass more wealth than the poorest half of humanity, is one that deserves to be overthrown.

The National Union of Students (NUS), and the organisations that dominate it, including Socialist Alternative and Young Labor, are bitterly hostile to this perspective. Their “National Day of Action” has one key goal: to confine the growing anger and disgust of hundreds of thousands of students to protest appeals to the Labor Party, the Greens and the populist “cross-bench” parties in the Senate.

Socialist Alternative’s *Red Flag* has once again called for students to try and pressure the official parliamentary set-up. One article stated: “When the Liberals first announced their cuts in 2014, they had the support of the cross-bench. It was not until we organised protests on the streets and on our campuses that the balance began to shift.”

Every word of this is a lie. In reality, the NUS demobilised

nationwide opposition to the 2014 education cuts introduced by Tony Abbott's government, suppressing any political struggle by students against the bipartisan assault on education. When measures were blocked in the Senate, cuts were pursued through different mechanisms. The result over the past three years has been the destruction of hundreds of academic jobs, the elimination of entire faculties and courses, and an increase in class sizes.

At protests throughout 2014, Labor Party politicians were welcomed to the platform to fraudulently posture as opponents of the cuts, while members of the IYSSE were censored and blocked from advancing their socialist perspective. The NUS was, and remains, silent about Labor's record in spearheading the dismantling of tertiary education. But the truth is that it was the Labor government of Bob Hawke that abolished free university education in the late 1980s. And in its 2013 budget, Julia Gillard's Greens-backed Labor government sought to introduce the largest single cut to university funding in Australian history: \$2.3 billion.

The appeals by the NUS and formations such as Socialist Alternative to Labor and the Greens, on the grounds they are the "lesser-evil" to the Coalition, is a political dead-end. It has no more credibility than the claims advanced in the US that Hillary Clinton, the hand-picked candidate of Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus, was a "lesser-evil" compared to Donald Trump, or that former banker, Emmanuel Macron, was a progressive alternative to the fascistic Marine Le Pen, in the French election.

The promotion of "lesser evilism" is not the product of political errors or misunderstandings. The NUS and Socialist Alternative speak for affluent layers of the upper middle-class, who are wedded to the existing political set-up and use it to advance their own careers in the trade union bureaucracy, the upper echelons of the public sector, academia, or the establishment media and parties.

Hand-in-hand with their kowtowing to Labor and the Greens, these layers are lining-up behind the war drive of US and Australian imperialism. That is why the NUS, which claims to represent the interests of students, is silent on the biggest issue facing young people, the eruption of militarism and the danger of a new world war.

One would search in vain for any NUS condemnation of the US airstrike in Syria last month, directed primarily against Russia, or the Trump administration's use of the largest bomb since the end of World War II against Afghan villagers in April. Nor does the NUS so much as mention Australia's central role in the US wars in Syria and Iraq, or the advanced plans for war against North Korea and China.

In country after country, capitalist governments are reviving militarist traditions to prepare the population for war. Sweden has reintroduced the draft, while France and Germany are contemplating similar measures. Japan is dispensing with the pacifist constraints imposed after its defeat in World War II,

while Germany is intent on becoming, once again, the strongman of Europe. And in this country, the political and corporate establishment has spent more than half a billion dollars "celebrating" the centenary of World War I, in a barrage of propaganda directed at promoting the "values" of militarism among young people.

Once again, the same contradictions of world capitalism that led to two world wars last century—above all between a unified global economy and the division of the world into rival capitalist nation-states—are creating the conditions for another war—this time threatening a nuclear disaster.

Young people, always the cannon-fodder in the frontlines of conflict, must play a central role in the fight to build an international anti-war movement of the working class, based on a socialist perspective, to end war, poverty, inequality and authoritarianism for all time.

This struggle can only go forward on the basis of the lessons of history. 2017 marks the centenary of the Russian Revolution, and the IYSSE and the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, are celebrating, through a series of international lectures, meetings and film screenings, the seizure of power by the working class, for the first, and as yet, only time in history.

That event, the October Revolution, demonstrated that the working class is, as Marx and Engels analysed, a revolutionary class, capable of overthrowing capitalism, ending war, and beginning the reorganisation of society on socialist lines. Above all, the revolution showed that the most vital factor in the struggle against war and austerity is the existence of a revolutionary party based on Marxism, that is, a historical and scientific perspective, capable of leading the working class in the revolutionary struggle for power.

We urge students and young people who want to fight for a future to join the IYSSE, help build our upcoming meetings and film showings, and participate in the fight for socialism.



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