

Student protests in Australia promote Labor and the Greens

Our reporters
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The National Union of Students (NUS) held protests around the country last week, ostensibly called in opposition to the attacks on universities contained in the federal Liberal-National government's May budget. The political purpose of the demonstrations, however, was to promote the illusion that appeals to Labor, the Greens and other parliamentary parties could stem the ongoing destruction of education rights.

Around 250 students participated in the protest in Sydney. Some 800 took part in the rally in Melbourne. Smaller numbers joined demonstrations in other capital cities and regional centres. Overall, attendance was far lower than at similar rallies in response to the 2014 federal budget.

The poorly attended demonstrations, which reflect growing alienation from the NUS and its support for the major parliamentary parties, contrasted sharply with widespread anger among students over the measures contained in the budget. These include raising university fees by 7.5 percent within five years, forcing most permanent residents, including New Zealand citizens, to pay exorbitant international fees in full, and lowering the annual income threshold for repayment of HECS student debts to \$42,000 a year.

The budget also imposes another 2.5 percent "efficiency dividend," or funding cut, upon universities, increasing their dependence on corporate sponsorship. Following decades of cuts to education by Labor and Liberal-National governments, the budget measures are aimed at further transforming universities into for-profit entities whose operations are tailored to the immediate needs of big business.

The NUS has presented the cuts as being solely a product of the ideological predilections of Liberal-National politicians. This line is used to advance the bankrupt claim that a Labor-Green government would

represent an alternative. NUS officials at the protests were silent on the central role played by successive Labor governments in slashing education spending.

At the same time, leading Greens parliamentarians were given the platform to posture as defenders of education. No mention was made of their repeated declarations during the federal election last year that they were prepared to join a coalition government with Labor committed to "fiscal responsibility," i.e., budget cuts.

The political purpose of the protests—to channel student discontent behind the official parliamentary set-up and suppress discussion of an alternative perspective—was underscored by the refusal of student union officials to allow representatives of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party, to address the demonstrations.

In Newcastle, the political censorship was carried out by leading figures in the Newcastle University Students' Union (NUSA), which held a protest on Tuesday. The IYSSE has had a club at Newcastle University for over a decade, and is the only political tendency on campus that holds regular meetings advancing a socialist perspective against war and austerity.

NUSA officials declared that there would be an "open mic." However, an IYSSE representative was blocked from speaking by Michael Labone, NUSA president and a member of Labor.

Labone told the IYSSE representative that he would not be allowed to speak because the IYSSE was "anti-union." He was referring to the principled opposition of the IYSSE and the SEP to the thoroughly corporatised unions, which have enforced the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs, along with the

decimation of wages and conditions, leading to the rise and rise of precarious, casual and low-paid work for young people.

Labone then asked if the IYSSE would “speak on the budget.” When this was answered in the affirmative, he responded, “No, you’re going to speak on imperialist war.” His response was a graphic expression of the pro-imperialist standpoint of the official student political milieu.

In reality, the austerity measures in the budget go hand in hand with massive funding allocations to the military, aimed at placing the country on a war footing. Continuing on from measures introduced by previous Labor governments, the budget provides for military spending of \$150 billion over the next four years and almost half-a-trillion dollars over a decade.

As the IYSSE alone has warned, this expenditure is aimed at deepening Australia’s integration into the US-led war drive in the Middle East, along with Washington’s confrontation with North Korea and China, which threatens to provoke nuclear war in Asia. Labone’s response underscored NUSA and Young Labor’s support for the vast squandering of resources on the military, and their hostility to the IYSSE’s fight for an international anti-war movement of the working class based on a socialist perspective.

NUSA’s censorship was opposed by a number of students. The campus publication, *Yak*, reported that there was “a heated argument between NUSA members and students that onlookers indicated were part of UON’s socialist community. The argument seemed to stem from those students’ dissatisfaction with other students [not] being able to speak aside from NUSA officers.”

Yak quoted NUSA Representative for the Faculty of Education and Arts Luci Regan, who declared that the censorship was carried out because the protest was “autonomous” and “apolitical.” This is a lie, through and through.

NUSA invited federal Labor MP for Newcastle, Sharon Clayton, to attend the demonstration, while NUSA speakers associated with Labor and the Young Greens promoted the fraud that those parties defend education. The invocation of “no politics,” a slogan used to derail protests and social struggles in Greece, Spain and elsewhere, really means “no socialist politics.”

At the protest in Melbourne, the IYSSE was prevented from speaking by Anneke Demanuele, NUS education officer and a prominent member of Socialist Alternative. She refused to provide any reason.

Socialist Alternative’s role as an adjunct of Labor and the Greens was underscored by the decision to hand the rally over to federal Greens MP, Adam Bandt. Bandt asserted that the Greens had opposed all previous attacks to higher education. In fact, the Greens vote every year in support of the budget appropriation bill—known as the “supply” bill—which includes the annual “efficiency dividend” cuts to tertiary education and huge, ongoing military spending.

Demonstrating his indifference to the conditions of students, Bandt hailed the existing educational system, declaring: “Australia should remain a place where no matter where you come from, or how much money you or your parents have, everyone has the right to a high quality tertiary education.”

In reality, free university education was abolished by the Labor government of Bob Hawke in the 1980s and the level of fees and other costs have placed it out of reach for many working class youth. Students are left with tens of thousands of dollars in debt for courses that have been hit by endless rounds of sackings, the shutting-down of subjects and entire faculties, and growing class sizes at universities around the country.

Bandt called for ongoing protest rallies until “the next election.” This is the perspective of the NUS—demonstrations promoting the election of a Labor-Green government that would be no less committed to austerity than the current Liberal-National government. The alternative, advanced by the IYSSE, is the fight for all of the social rights of the working class, including free education at all levels, in opposition to the entire capitalist political establishment.



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