

Australia: Thousands attend climate change rally in Sydney

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An estimated 20,000 students and workers attended a “climate emergency” rally at Sydney Town Hall on Wednesday. The protest was held the day after smoke from bushfires surrounding the city caused air pollution to reach 11 times the level considered “hazardous,” prompting thousands of workers to walk off the job.

The large turnout of high school and university students, professionals, office workers, firefighters, and retirees at short notice expressed a developing political radicalisation of broad sections of the population.

The sentiments animating those in attendance were not limited to anger over government inaction on climate change, but included hostility to the dominance of the corporate elite over political life, the massive growth of social inequality and the rise of militarism and nationalism.

The organisers, however, including New South Wales (NSW) Greens parliamentarian David Shoebridge and members of Socialist Alternative, sought to prevent any discussion of these wider issues. Their aim was to channel the emerging movement back behind the very political establishment responsible for environmental destruction.

Speakers blamed “mismanagement” of the environment by the state and federal Liberal governments for the crisis and promoted the illusion that mass demonstrations could pressure governments to take “immediate and radical action.” No assessment was made of the innumerable international climate summits, which have done nothing to reduce carbon emissions.

Shoebridge called out NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian and Prime Minister Scott Morrison, saying, “We have a premier who’s missing in action and a prime minister who wants to do climate harm.” He made no mention of his own party’s support for the federal Labor government’s 2011 carbon tax policy. Under Labor’s own modelling, carbon emissions would have continued to rise for years to come had the tax remained in place.

City of Sydney councillor Jess Miller told the audience, “Change happens at a local level,” and listed a number of token measures enacted by the local government, including a

contract to buy solar and wind generated power, and their declaration of a “climate emergency.”

The speakers sought to confine discussion to New South Wales, and to promote the Labor Party. Leighton Drury, state secretary of the Fire Brigade Employees Union, said: “It’s this government, the NSW government. The O’Farrell, Baird, Berejiklian government who have absolutely failed the community to invest adequately in fire services for NSW.”

Drury neglected to mention that the 2.5 percent cap on public sector pay increases often attributed to the Liberal party was a policy introduced by the last Labor government in 2008. Labor carried out over a decade of austerity measures, gutting firefighting and other public services.

Maritime Union of Australia delegate Nat Wasley bemoaned the “draconian strike laws that exist in our current broken industrial relations system.” Wasley did not add that this “broken” system was introduced by the Rudd Labor government in 2009 with the support of the unions.

Dr Janet Roden, a representative of the NSW Nurses and Midwives’ Association, even promoted sections of the state Liberal government, declaring that NSW Minister for the Environment Matt Kean, “sounds like he’s coming on board.”

Socialist Alternative speakers made no criticism of these openly right-wing statements. While tub-thumping against the “one percent,” they did not mention socialism or the inherently global character of the climate crisis. Their call to action was limited to further protests, aimed at placing pressure on capitalist governments, and for people to sign-up to the corporatised unions, which function as adjuncts of governments and big business.

Socialist Equality Party campaigners insisted on the need for a turn to the working class. They explained that climate change is a product of the profit system. It cannot be resolved within the framework of competing nation-states, each advancing the interests of their own corporate elite. What is required is an international movement of the working class, aimed at the reorganisation of the world

economy to meet social need, not private profit.

WSWS reporters spoke to workers and students attending the rally.

Perrin, a 21-year-old office worker, said: “I came here today because I think the Liberal government shows a complete indifference to the people that it governs. The horrible mismanagement of our water systems, the horrible mismanagement of our budget, the weird obsession they have with a surplus, but there’s no discussion on climate change. It’s not insanity, it is calculated planning and ensuring money goes into certain people’s pockets.

“Capitalism is a flawed system. It doesn’t take into account what people need.”

Asked about the persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, Perrin stated: “The behaviour of Labor and the Greens on Assange shows that they’re capitalist parties. They’re bound by their policies and not allowed to speak about these issues.

“Workers don’t have a party that represents their interests. We need to build that party. If we don’t do it, nobody is going to do it for us. We have been failed by the capitalist system.”

Conrad, a Year 12 student, said he’d come to the rally because: “We can’t vote, but this is a good way of expressing our views. There are immediate consequences that we are experiencing right now. It’s not just somewhere off in the distance. You’re literally breathing in poisonous smoke.

“Corporatism and big businesses shouldn’t have such a big influence on government. The businesses are the ones having direct influence, and that’s got nothing to do with the people’s views.”

Conrad also expressed concerns over the impact of US imperialism, saying: “The US is pretty intrusive on other places. Not just with direct war, but also proxy wars, the way they’re interfering with other people’s governments.”

Asked about the attacks on Assange, Conrad said: “That’s damaging freedom of speech. If you’re not allowed to be critical and reveal shortcomings of the government, if you get directly prosecuted for that, that’s such big consequences for us.”

Izzy, a uni student, came to the rally because she, like many other young people, was “fed up with all this inaction. I think it’s about time. How many rallies have they done now, and there’s still been no response to all of this? It’s just disappointing.”

Speaking about the unprecedented smoke haze blanketing Sydney in recent days, Izzy said: “It’s scary, it’s so alarming, people are told to stay indoors. That’s not normal. Fire season started early and it’s just gonna get longer.”

Renata, a childcare worker from Brazil, said: “Our system

is always focussed on profit, that’s why I wrote the sign ‘we can’t breathe money.’ Those companies are making lots of money, but at the same time they’re destroying the environment that we live in. I think there’s a lot of things that actually need to change, the economy, the way we do politics. We’re trying to do individual actions, but we need to do something bigger, we need to find other ways to organise as a society.”

Asked about the threat of war, Renata said: “There’s many other conflicts happening that are killing as much as war. In Brazil, we have a president who’s killing a lot of people because he’s following this capitalist thinking. I think the war is already happening.”

Speaking about fires raging in the Amazon, Renata said: “I think the fires are mostly to create pasture for cows, and it’s also the same issue about profit.”

Lauren, a university student from the Central Coast, told our reporters she came to the rally because: “The fires are actually really close to my house, which is terrifying to me. It puts it all into perspective, rather than just seeing it on the news, it’s actually happening in real life and it’s actually affecting people that live in my community.”

Asked about the grossly inadequate state of funding for firefighters, Lauren said: “It’s actually disgusting. They’ve cut everything.”

Sarah, a 19-year-old childcare worker, told the WSWS: “I came here today because the world is choking. We’ve been burning for three months. The politicians are just serving themselves and the richer population who are living close to the beach. All they seem to care about is profit and the bottom line.

“I think Assange and climate change is linked. Sooner or later the truth is going to come out, you can’t hide it.

“We need a revolution, we really do.”



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