Thousands of Australian high school students protest climate change inaction

Our reporters
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On Friday, thousands of high school students struck from class and joined protests opposing the refusal of governments to take action on climate change. Some 47 separate rallies were held including in all of the capital cities, as well as a host of regional centres and smaller towns.

In Sydney, Australia's largest city, around 4,000 people attended, while some 5,000 participated in Melbourne. There were crowds ranging from the hundreds to a couple of thousand in cities such as Brisbane, Adelaide and Hobart.

Attendees expressed the broader popular opposition to the failure of successive Liberal-National and Labor governments to address the mounting environmental crisis. Over recent years, the Australian population has been battered by bushfires, floods, droughts and other disasters.

The turnout, however, was substantially lower than at similar climate strikes in recent years. This can not only be explained by concerns over COVID-19. Most restrictions have been lifted, as part of a pro-business reopening of the economy spearheaded by governments and the corporate elite.

Rather, the relatively low attendance reflects the impasse of the protest politics advanced by the environmental groups organising the protests, and a growing scepticism among students that appeals to official politicians are of any value.

Official speakers and organisers at yesterday's rallies based themselves on an entirely nationalist orientation. There was no discussion of developments outside of Australia.

Instead, the climate crisis was largely reduced to an issue of the right-wing proclivities of Prime Minister Scott Morrison and his Liberal-National Coalition government, who the speakers nevertheless claimed could be pressured into changing course.

No mention was made about the record of Labor and the Greens. Both are big business parties which have done nothing to address climate change when in office. While the majority of speakers were young high school students, at each of the rallies representatives of the unions spoke denouncing the Morrison government.

While they avoided explicitly calling for a vote for Labor and the Greens, the thrust of their remarks was to fraudulently present these parties as a lesser-evil or even a progressive alternative, and to peddle the illusion that change could come about through parliament.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party, advanced a diametrically opposed perspective. IYSSE campaigners distributed a statement placing the climate catastrophe in the context of a series of existential crises produced by capitalism, including the pandemic and the threat of world war. They explained that the only solution was to build a revolutionary movement of the working class, aimed at establishing a socialist society based on meeting social need, not private profit.

In Brisbane, the IYSSE spoke to Minna and Tayla, both in their final year of high school. Tayla said: "We came today because climate change is obviously a critical issue. The scientists are telling us that by 2050 we will be at an irreversible point. We are running out of time before our world is truly wrecked."

Minna added: "I don't like the way our government is running this. We have a prime minister who doesn't believe in climate change. Change needs to happen and this is going to be part of it, involving ourselves in something bigger than all of us."

Reflecting on the failure of previous protests to effect change, Tayla stated "Protests like this are probably a hopeless cause. There's only so much you can say to someone who doesn't believe in it. It's kind of like talking to a brick wall. When you have a government system set up to inhibit certain things, no matter who is in power, those things are going to be inhibited and affected."

Commenting on the COVID-19 pandemic and the Israeli bombardment of Gaza, Tayla observed: "When you look at specific events in history a lot of problems have been caused by things like greed and capitalism. When you have a system that's inherently violent, no matter what you do with that system it's always going to be broken."

Tayla said: "I hope we make some real difference, but like you said with capitalism, we have been trying this for ages and nothing seems to be working, so we should just get rid of it and start again and do something better."

Riley, another student from Brisbane, said: "The Morrison government needs to stop giving public funds to fossil fuels. They don't care about the future generations. We need to have a sustainable energy future.

"To an extent, the problem is capitalism. It's not the best vision, using up all the resources. I think using grassroots political parties that are not in the pockets of the corporations is the best way to go."

In the regional New South Wales city of Newcastle, Josie, a 17-year-old student, said: "I see a lot of promises that are not

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being met and a lot of lip service, but not actually a lot of actions. The Australian government is supposedly committed to the UN Paris climate agreement, however, we are not actually on track for any of the requirements at the moment."

Sophie, her friend, added: "The whole argument of the Australian government is we are doing better than governments all over the world. Really, we are in the top percentage for fossil fuels, which is sad.

"Most people in the government are out to make money, not to do what is best for the future of the world. Most governments are older generations, not younger generations. They have helped create the problem, but it is not going to be their problem, it is going to be ours."

Josie commented: "I think at the moment politics is just so, the top half, not even half, the top percent of society, heavy. You hear about the people who get in, they come from a very high socio-economic status. You have to think, how will these people represent the whole nation, if they have only experienced a very small fraction of what it is like to be Australian?"

Josie said it was "really concerning" that profits were being put before lives in the COVID pandemic. "Australia has been buying up vaccines, even though we don't need them to save as many lives," she noted, adding that "there has been a big push in the media lately" to get "everyone back to normal, which is max production."

"I just think the priority is shocking. Even the World Health Organisation criticised the fact that most wealthy countries were buying out the vaccinations and locking out third world countries that really need them. You see the crisis in India where it's so bad people are being forced to burn bodies in carparks."

Daniel, a 21-year-old worker, said the lack of action on climate change "is all about profit, all about the economy. It's not about the future that young people are trying to fight for and grow up in. It's about what is in their wallet.

"When COVID happened, the first thing that they talked about, it wasn't about the health of the people, the big thing was the economy. The economy has crashed! That was the focus."

Two university students in Newcastle, Sophie and Tarra, said that "Capitalism is intrinsically related to climate change. We need to put a stop to capitalism or endless growth, as well as the funding going to unnecessary wars. We are spending so much tax money on it. Biden is putting so much money for arms into Israel, which are used against Palestine. This could be used to address climate change instead."

Speaking on the current staff sackings and course closures at the University of Newcastle, they commented "There are also so many cuts to education as well, to arts and humanities. In terms of electives, there is now one course, whereas before it was about 40. My friend's aunty is a lecturer, and everything has been dropped completely and she is losing work. The costs of humanities subjects are also increasing, debt has risen. It has been hectic. The art section is completely void. Nothing is going on there and it's sad."

In Melbourne, Jack, a biology student at the University of Melbourne said he had "been to a few climate change rallies in the past" and was "very disappointed" with the government inaction around the world.

When asked what would reverse the impact of climate change Jack stated: "Clearly, not just climate marches. We need something else. I know people say 'when you young people are in charge, you're going to save everything.' Maybe that's true, but there are always going to be those that prioritise the economy over the environment. Hopefully it doesn't take the loss of the Great Barrier Reef or tigers to change things."

Jack went on to say that it is "not about different nations and putting up borders. The environment has no borders. We need to put aside our differences and know that globally we need to work together. It's not about prioritising individual nations—it's about our goal."

On the COVID-19 pandemic, Jack said "I agree that almost ubiquitously there has been incompetence [from governments] on the pandemic. Even though they didn't put enough effort and drive into defending against the pandemic, they still acknowledge that it exists. We're still trying to convince some people that climate change is real."

Anna said she first came to a climate protest "in Year 8 and nothing has changed since then. I think it's one of those things where it is important to show that there are lots of people who are passionate about this and believe that there needs to be change because they're not going to listen to a few of us."

In Sydney, Enzo, a Year 10 student, said "We came here to protest climate change and hopefully get a response from the government and the people profiting from this industry. The response last year was absolutely nothing.

"If someone is profiting off it and they are powerful enough then it's very difficult to change. While protesting against the government might help, protesting against the people who are bribing them, who are making money off the world being destroyed is what we need to be doing. They are the reason we can't make change."

Commenting on the major political parties in Australia, he asked: "Is it really democracy if we've got a choice between two parties that are both just as bad? If all we can choose between are two different parties that, at the end of the day, are both pretty similar then we are not really voting on our government."

Alex added "It's disappointing they haven't done anything and it's really important they do and that we try other ways. Protesting is not actually affecting them. We can protest all we want, and it won't change their lives."

Ferdinand, a Year 10 student from Sydney, commented that when "it comes to the class system, if you don't have enough money to change it, you can't change it. Whether you protest or not, you are not going to be able to open the eyes of someone who is comfortably sitting in their mansion, making money off inhumane things. They don't see it firsthand and the effect it has on us as people."

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