

Students and young people must take up the fight against Australia's anti-democratic electoral laws

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The following remarks were delivered by Oscar Grenfell, national convenor of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and a regular writer for the WWS, at a Socialist Equality Party (Australia) public meeting on Sunday, October 31.

The meeting, which can be viewed in full here, outlined the relationship between anti-democratic electoral laws, aimed at deregistering “minor” parties, the homicidal and pro-business pandemic policies of the ruling elite and the deepening crisis of the capitalist system. Speakers explained that the measures are an attempt to prevent mounting social opposition from finding political expression, and outlined the SEP’s campaign to defeat them.

The electoral laws we’re fighting against are a frontal attack on the political rights of the entire working class. But students and young people are particularly targeted by the measures.

Labor and the Liberal-Nationals know that they’re widely despised by young people, who rightly view these parties as corrupt instruments of big business and the banks. And the general growth of anti-capitalist sentiment is sharpest among the youth. The fact that this generation has no future under the profit system—something many already recognized—has been hammered home by the experiences of the pandemic. On every front, it is young people, together with the most oppressed and exploited sections of the working class, who have borne the brunt.

In the first place, even though COVID infections in Australia have been fewer than in countries such as Britain and the US, a large number of kids, teenagers and young adults have contracted this potentially-deadly virus. Since the start of the pandemic, there have been 21,616 cases among children under nine accounting for 13 percent of all infections; in the 10–19 age bracket, 24,681 or 15 percent. These are figures that have largely been covered up in the media, as the drive to reopen schools continues apace.

The highest infection rate has been in young adults 20–29, with 34,788 cases, or 21 percent of the total. If you add it together, 49 percent of all infections have been among people under 29.

National data for hospitalisations by age group is not available. But amid the peak of the Sydney outbreak, three percent of all infections among teenagers led to an admission. If you extrapolate for the total number of cases, that’s over 700 teens who have become so ill they’ve needed hospital care.

And we’ve seen it internationally, but also here—official claims that young people don’t die of COVID are a politically-motivated lie. To cite just two tragic examples, Aude Alaskar, a healthy 27-year-old football player died suddenly at his home in western Sydney in August. And two weeks ago, a 15-year-old girl became the youngest victim of COVID to date.

The infections are the direct result of governments refusing to implement the necessary lockdowns and restrictions. Now that they’re dispensing with all safety measures, in line with the let-it-rip policy around the world, young people are even more at risk, with hundreds of thousands of kids being herded into the schools and young workers into the workplaces.

The high infection rates among 20- to 29-year-olds are not only because of the mobility of that demographic, but because young workers are most likely to be in low-paid, casual, precarious and unsafe work, if they have a job at all.

As the pandemic struck, young people accounted for 46.0 percent of short-term casual employees but just 17.4 percent share of all employees. They’re paid minimum wage, they don’t know how many shifts they’ll receive. During the COVID outbreaks, they’ve either had their hours cut, or in many cases, been forced to work in unsafe conditions.

A few other statistics documenting the social reality: Half of Australia’s 25-year-olds are unable to secure full-time employment, despite 60 percent holding post-school qualifications. One in three young people are unemployed or underemployed. The official youth unemployment rate—undoubtedly understated—is more than double the national average, currently standing at over 10 percent. But in working-class areas, the figure is far far higher. In the south-west of Sydney, the official youth unemployment is just over 20 percent, but the real figure is probably closer to 40 percent.

And the plans of the ruling elite will intensify this social crisis. While they’re reopening the economy and forcing the population to live with the virus, the corporations, their governments and the unions are using the pandemic to ramp-up pro-business restructuring. The watchword is for greater “workplace flexibility”—that is, get rid of most of the permanent, full-time jobs that exist, and inflict the miserable conditions associated with the gig-economy on an entire generation.

This is already well underway. In a 2020 report, the productivity

commission found that incomes for young people were continuously falling. According to the report, the income of 15- to 24-year-olds, when adjusted for inflation, had fallen by 1.6 percent every single year between 2008 and 2018—a 16 percent drop in a decade. That’s the result of declining wages, and also the freeze of unemployment and Youth Allowance payments, which haven’t been increased despite the growing cost of living.

Combined with the huge increase in property prices, this means that just finding somewhere to live is increasingly impossible. In 2017–18, 28 percent of young people aged 15–24 lived in lower income households experiencing housing stress. That is where 30 percent or more of income is being spent on rent or a mortgage. And for 20–24-year-olds it is even higher at 37 percent.

That situation has only worsened during the pandemic. Median house prices have increased by almost 22 percent in the past year, with the median price in Sydney now approaching \$1.5 million. So the vast majority of young people can forget about ever owning a home, and those who do purchase one will be saddled with massive debts for decades to come.

The government-promoted speculative frenzy in the property market is flowing on to increased rents. In June, CoreLogic reported that median rents were up 6.6 percent in a year, the biggest increase in a decade. The median weekly rent is now over \$470 for houses or units. Compare that with the maximum Youth Allowance payment of \$256 a week, or the JobSeeker rate of \$320 a week and the impossibility of the situation is clear.

There are more indicators of the social crisis than we have time to review. A Foodbank report late last year found that 65 percent of young people experienced food insecurity, meaning they missed a meal because they couldn’t afford it, at least once a week.

Predictably these conditions, for which governments are responsible, are fuelling a mental health epidemic. A report this month by the BlackDog Institute found that the number of workers aged 18–34 experiencing mental distress had increased from 15 percent prior to the pandemic, to 30 percent this year. The report cited the instability of working hours and conditions and a lack of social or government support during the pandemic as major contributors.

It is becoming clear to millions of young people that capitalism offers them no future. There is the social crisis, the adoption of murderous pandemic policies in the interests of the rich, and the other existential threats posed by the capitalist system, from the climate disaster to the danger of a nuclear war that would imperil humanity’s future. The government and Labor know this opposition exists and its one of the central reasons they have imposed these anti-democratic electoral laws.

Just this month, Education Minister Alan Tudge noted a survey which found 40 percent of young people would favour an alternative to so-called “liberal-democratic governance.” This was a catastrophe, he said. Despite the misleading way the figures were presented, the issue was not that young people were hankering for authoritarianism or dictatorship, which is what capitalism has in store. Instead, the real problem, Tudge said, was that the influence of communism and socialism was growing.

His remarks were just the latest in a series of such comments. One could cite articles in the financial press, warning that the fuel

which ignited mass youth participation in the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions exists everywhere. And worried commentary on polls in the US and internationally, showing a majority of young people favour socialism over capitalism.

Young people want to fight for a future. We’ve seen that in the massive climate strikes of recent years, and the widespread opposition to the dangerous school reopenings, including mass petitions initiated by high school students themselves.

The laws are aimed at straitjacketing the youth and the working class in a capitalist two-party set-up that offers them nothing but war, austerity and authoritarianism. Their purpose is to prevent any political alternative, especially a socialist perspective, from being discussed, because the ruling elite knows that it could very rapidly win mass support. The issues confronting this generation are revolutionary in scope, and the capitalist class is well aware that in every period of social upheaval, the youth have been at the forefront of the fight for socialist revolution.

The IYSSE is calling on all young people and students who want to fight for a future to take up the struggle against these electoral laws. They are an attempt to suppress your political rights and to prevent you from accessing the socialist and revolutionary perspective that offers the only way forward. Become an electoral member of the SEP today, sign-up your friends, help us organise meetings and discussions with young people, and become active in this campaign.

And above all, take up the perspective that these laws seek to block. That is a socialist perspective aimed at refashioning society on a world scale, to meet the social needs of the vast majority of the population, not the profit interests of a tiny corporate oligarchy, and the rival nation-states that advance the interests of competing cliques of the capitalist class. We urge you to become involved in the IYSSE, and to apply to join the SEP as a full-member to take your place in the fight for socialism.



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