

Australia: Students and youth speak out over war, COVID and rising poverty

Our reporters
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Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners spoke to students and youth this week in New South Wales (NSW), Victoria and Queensland where the party is running election candidates for the federal Senate.

Thao, a Vietnamese psychology student at Western Sydney University spoke with Max Boddy, one of the party's two Senate candidates for NSW.

"I currently live with my husband in a house that has shared rooms. We only live in one room out of the whole house and our rent is \$300 per week. This is very expensive. I work casually, so my pay is not fixed, but because I get a slightly higher pay rate I don't get called in much and barely get 20 hours work a week.

"My husband works full-time—40 hours a week—and his pay is just \$600 a week and so between us we bring in \$900 a week. There is \$300 for the rent and between \$250 and \$300 for food because prices have gone up. With fuel we used to spend \$100 maximum a week for both of us driving. This has doubled and is now \$200.

"Sometimes I'd rather stay home than go to work because it costs more to drive there. We don't eat out and I skip meals—breakfast and sometimes lunch as well. It's very expensive to eat at the university because it is all private companies so I just bring cookies to eat, which are not nutritious or fulfilling, but just so I can get past the day," she stated.

"The stress of having to make money to pay rent, petrol and tuition fees impacts on my studies. I'm a permanent Australian resident, which means I'm not eligible for HECS loans, so I pay roughly \$4,000 a semester. It's miserable.

"The cost of living is going up because of the war and COVID. COVID has impacted workers. Lots of people had to stay home and those who are close or casual contacts must isolate. But since the governments have opened up it's just gotten worse, which I don't

understand," she said.

Boddy explained the SEP's global campaign for coordinated international measures to eliminate COVID-19. Thao agreed and added, "This would have a very positive impact. As I understand it, people who are in the upper class are doing just fine and not facing the losses we're experiencing. My family has been lucky not to suffer any death but we are struggling financially.

"I think it is a good idea for income to be spread out evenly. I can now say that while I had known that classes exist, I am now actually experiencing the differences in classes and how they cope with crises such as COVID and war. Take the floods, the government doesn't do anything at all," she added.

"I'm anti-war because I came from a country of war, Vietnam, which was invaded even before the Americans. We lost members of our family and people have suffered long term effects after the war, from trauma and Agent Orange. This lasts for generations, it doesn't stop when the war ends.

"The war in the Ukraine shouldn't be happening. The US and NATO pushed Russia to a point. They made Russia feel threatened, Russia's response was a defence mechanism. What Russia did was wrong, people are dying, but there was a cause to it," Thao said.

Josh, a first-year student at Griffith University in Brisbane, spoke with SEP candidate for the Senate in Queensland, Mike Head.

"War is a very real threat for the entire planet," Josh said. "Countries, especially America, have too many interests in other territories. It is not good and is escalating. It's a real problem that we need to address. It's a power struggle. It's power-hungry governments always looking to gain more and more of an advantage

and control over other territories.”

Mike Head explained that the SEP and the International Committee of the Fourth International opposed the Russian invasion of Ukraine but that Putin was goaded into it by the US pushing NATO closer and closer to the Russian border and overturning the government in Ukraine in 2014. He said the US was seeking to overthrow the regimes in Russia and China to establish US domination.

Josh responded: “Yes, I do believe that the US does play a role in building the conflict between countries that is not necessary. It’s just an attempt to gain more power and control over the planet.”

Referring to COVID-19, Josh said: “Governments have not sufficiently handled the pandemic and the fact that they have just lifted all the restrictions recently is causing a lot of problems. I don’t believe it’s a good thing. I know many people—close friends and colleagues—that have fallen sick because it’s just running wild now. I’ve had friends who have been hospitalised by it and it’s quite distressing.

“It’s nowhere near finished,” he continued, rejecting government and media claims that the pandemic was over. “There is so much more to go, and we need to start working on that now. We need to have a plan in place to help everybody and ensure everyone is supported.” Josh said scientific health advice had been overruled to boost corporate profits and added, “You constantly have to purchase RAT tests. They cost \$20 each, every time you get flu-like symptoms. It’s unbelievable.”

Asked about climate change, Josh said: “The planet is burning and it’s a real concern. We’re still using coal and oil and mining and everything like that, which is unfair for the planet and future generations. Think about my future kids perhaps, or grandkids. What is the planet going to look like for them?”

Josh also spoke about some of his working conditions, “I recently got a new job in the kitchen at Subway. The wage will just get me by, with the hours I have to work, which is about \$20 an hour. I’m forced to work at least 20 hours a week, when the recommended is only 15, just so I can afford to live. Capitalism is an inherently flawed system. The wealth is always going to the top and not to the bottom and nobody’s being helped. It’s not the right way.”

Ellen, a University of Newcastle engineering student,

spoke about her personal experiences over the past two years. “I’m at university and studying engineering but thinking, what am I doing this for? It used to be, go to uni, get a job, buy a house—tick, tick, tick—but now I’m looking at my future. I’ve already got a part-time job but am thinking that I’ll probably never be able to afford a house. What am I working for if I can’t even afford rent and going out is too expensive? The cost of living is so much that it’s not worth working anymore....

“My university work has suffered a lot—this is my sixth year of study—and I’ve had to study part time so that I can afford to pay rent. I delayed my degree so that I can work, but then I have also failed a couple of subjects. It hasn’t gone very well because my mental health has been declining.

“I looked at my HECS debt the other day for example, and I almost had a breakdown thinking ‘how am I going to pay this off?’ I don’t know what I am even paying for at university anymore and don’t feel supported by the faculty. It feels like I am paying a ridiculous amount of money to be given power-point slides,” Ellen said.

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