

The way forward after collapse of School Strike for Climate movement in Australia

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Last Friday the School Strike for Climate (SS4C) movement held protests in several Australian cities, including Sydney, the country's most populous city, Canberra and Perth. The event in Sydney was attended by less than a thousand people, fewer than 200 of them high school students. Participation at the other demonstrations was in the dozens.

The rallies contrasted starkly with the protests held in 2018 and 2019. Those had been part of an international movement inspired by the call of Swedish student Greta Thunberg for students around the world to take mass action to fight climate change.

The protests internationally involved hundreds of thousands, even millions of young people. Those in Australia were some of the largest in the world on a per capita basis. In September 2019, as many as 350,000 students across Australia struck from school and participated in some of the biggest youth demonstrations in the country's history.

Little over three years later and the movement has undeniably collapsed. The Sydney rally was dominated by adult supporters of the Greens and various middle-class non-government organisations that lobby governments. The handful of students who took part were largely affiliated with the Greens. They were overwhelmingly from high schools in the inner-city with its more middle-class populations and from wealthy private schools.

The shift is not the result of the climate crisis alleviating or being on the path to a progressive resolution. On the contrary, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned last year that many of the effects of climate change are on the verge of becoming irreversible if they are not already. At least 40 percent of the global population is immediately threatened. Extreme weather events, including disastrous flooding in Australia last year, are becoming more frequent.

Meanwhile, governments refuse to adhere to even the grossly inadequate emissions reductions targets set by one toothless international summit after another.

Nor is the fall in attendance the product of apathy among young people. A Mission Australia Youth Survey last year found that climate remains the overwhelming concern of youth. Of the 18,800 participants, 51 percent rated it as one of their biggest worries. The issue with the next highest level of

concern, equity and discrimination, was nominated by 36 percent of respondents.

The real reason for the collapse of the movement is the bankrupt political perspective that was advanced by the SS4C organisers and the environmentalist organisations with which they were affiliated.

That perspective—of appealing to capitalist governments to see reason and to address climate change—has manifestly failed. That highlights the need for students and young people to turn to a new, socialist perspective directed against the source of the climate crisis, the profit system itself.

At one SS4C rally after another, the organisers directed students to make impotent appeals to official politicians. The organisers, and their advisors, were also clearly fearful of and hostile to the mass attendance that their own events attracted.

After the rally in September 2019, the largest that SS4C held, the organisation liquidated almost all subsequent events into small lobbying efforts outside the offices of individual members of parliament.

Students were divided up. Discussion was restricted or outright suppressed. Representatives of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth wing of the Socialist Equality Party, were repeatedly denied the right to speak at the rallies. This censorship was conducted on the grounds that SS4C was not “politically partisan.” Yet climate change is an inherently political issue!

Moreover, for the last several years, SS4C ascribed Australia's contribution to climate change entirely to then Prime Minister Scott Morrison and his Liberal-National Coalition government. In the lead up to the May 2022 federal election, SS4C openly campaigned for a Labor government as well as for the Greens.

What is the result? The Albanese Labor government's climate policies are virtually identical to those of the Coalition. It has a notional target of zero-emissions by 2050, decades after scientists say that benchmark must be achieved. But even that goal is merely “aspirational.” Instead, Labor is openly governing in the interests of the coal and gas companies as part of its broader pro-business agenda.

For their part, the Greens have demonstrated there is no red line they will not cross. Greens leader Adam Bandt has even

said that his party will consider Labor's program of opening new coal and gas mines. This reprises the Greens' long record of collaborating with Labor governments as they have increased emissions, while pursuing policies of war abroad and social cuts against the working class at home.

The various "solutions" to climate change within the framework of capitalism, championed by the Greens and middle-class environmental organisations, have failed wherever they have been implemented. Carbon trading, for instance, did not reduce emissions in Europe but did create a lucrative new market for financial speculators.

Young people are politically inexperienced, but they are not stupid. They can see that the perspective advanced by SS4C has failed. Growing numbers recognise that the climate crisis is inextricably tied to the profit-making operations of the major corporations.

That is indisputable. A study by Oxfam last year, for instance, found that the world's richest 125 billionaires are directly responsible for emitting about 3 million tonnes of carbon dioxide on average per year, more than 1 million times the amount emitted by 90 percent of people.

Capitalism means the subordination of every aspect of social life, including the environment and human life, to the accumulation of private profit. Some 150 years ago, Karl Marx, the founder of scientific socialism, explained that capitalism "disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth," and inevitably leads to the degradation of the environment.

That insight, at the dawn of modern capitalist production, is self-evident today. And it is intensified by another key contradiction of contemporary society. We live in a globally-integrated world with an international economy. All problems require a worldwide solution. But society is still organised into antagonistic capitalist nation-states, each advancing the interests of their own capitalist ruling class.

These tendencies find expression not only in climate change, but in the other existential dangers that capitalism presents humanity. That includes pandemics, with capitalist governments around the world having responded to the COVID crisis by rejecting the necessary public health measures because of their impact on capitalist production and profits. The consequence is a continuous spread of the deadly virus and some 20 million deaths worldwide.

Similarly, the crisis of capitalism is fueling a world war, which could result in the nuclear annihilation of humanity. The US and NATO are waging a proxy war in Ukraine against Russia, a nuclear-armed power. And the US and its allies, including Australia, are actively preparing for war with China, which is viewed as the chief threat to the interests of American imperialism. Once again, capitalism is leading humanity into the abyss.

The alternative is the fight for socialism. Socialism means the reorganisation of society, from top to bottom, to meet social need, not private profit. It can only be established on an

international scale, ending the irrational division of the world into antagonistic capitalist nation-states. In this way, society's resources could be consciously allocated and developed to tackle climate change, poverty and every other pressing social problem.

Socialism is necessary, but it must be fought for. The basis for such a struggle exists in the reemergence of mass working class struggles. All over the world, workers are engaging in strikes, protests and other actions against the soaring cost of living, poverty and austerity attacks waged by the same capitalist governments responsible for the climate disaster. These struggles are an expression of the fact that the working class is the revolutionary force in capitalist society. Its very social position places it in opposition to the rule of the banks and the corporations. Workers have no interest in a society ruled by profit, nor in the archaic nation-state system.

The critical issue, though, is to transform these emerging struggles into a conscious mass movement fighting for international socialism. That requires a political leadership and a party. It is to develop such a leadership that the Socialist Equality Party is standing in the current NSW election campaign. The IYSSE, the youth movement of the SEP, is likewise in the forefront of the struggle to mobilise students and youth in the struggle against war. We appeal to students and young people who want to fight against climate change and war, and for a decent future, to get involved with the IYSSE today and to take up the struggle for socialism!

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