

International students in Australia speak about rental and cost-of-living crisis

Our reporters
20 June 2023

Last month, the *World Socialist Web Site* published an article on a spate of reports pointing to the dire situation facing international students in Australia.

These students, treated like cash cows by Australian universities, represent among the most vulnerable sections of the population. Amid a worsening social crisis, skyrocketing cost-of-living and rental expenses, and global financial disaster, international students, young people and the working class more broadly are being made to pay for the profit-driven agenda of the ruling elite under capitalism.

Reports have pointed to international students driven to illness, homelessness and cramped accommodation as a result of soaring living expenses and insecure housing.

Members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality clubs on university campuses around the country spoke with international students about the conditions they confront.

Zhi is a student from China at the University of Newcastle in regional New South Wales.

“I came to Australia with four classmates. For the first few months, it was difficult to find a place to rent. Way harder than I thought. We spent a lot of time filling out applications, doing house tours. We filled in about 50 applications. We ended up sharing rent in an air B&B for a month and a half. Sometimes we had to fit ourselves in a room with one bed,” Zhi said.

The Chinese student said he and his classmates were told by the Chinese government that people in Australia are not friendly to Chinese people. “But after staying here for one year, it’s not as bad as they said.”

A Victoria University media student in Melbourne, originally from Mexico, said that he didn’t think the money being spent on young people and students by the government was enough. By contrast, the student

pointed to the government committing \$368 billion to nuclear-powered submarines as part of the aggressive anti-China AUKUS military alliance between Australia, the US and the UK.

“I particularly don’t get military expenses,” the student raised. “I get frustrated when the government is spending so much money getting the military so powerful instead of better housing and other stuff for the people. They’re not delivering on their promises, they’re not protecting the people, keeping them safe, or giving them the resources so people can have a nice life.”

The student raised that he thought the billions of dollars of stage three tax cuts being implemented by the federal Labor government or the wealthiest layers of the Australian population was shocking.

“The population is like a pyramid, so a lot of people in the bottom are really poor and don’t have enough money to have a decent life, and the little tip on the top has all the money, they have a luxurious life and don’t even get to expend all that money in their entire lives. I think that tax cut was really unnecessary and could have been good to help the people that really need it.”

An Indian Masters student living on campus at La Trobe University in Melbourne arrived in Australia three months ago. She said: “everything is expensive ... food, clothes, everything.” She said that she has to use food banks every week to feed herself, along with other international students, as well as domestic students who are struggling to pay for groceries.

The student said she chose not to rent because it is “too expensive compared to living on campus.” But, as winter approaches, the student noted that campus accommodation management have not turned central heating in her building on.

“It’s very cold. Heating is controlled by a main

switch and they're not going to turn it on until the outside temperature reaches around 4°C."

Mohammed, a student originally from Bangladesh studying at Sydney's Macquarie University, pays \$225 per week for a room in shared rental accommodation, having moved away from a previous dwelling which was one-and-a-half hours from campus.

"I had to change two trains and one metro. It was exhausting travel for me. That's why I moved. It's pretty expensive, but if you are a student and don't get paid on a permanent basis, it's hard to get a rental," the student said.

Mohammed gets no financial support from the Australian or Bangladeshi government. He works as a support service assistant at a hospital in Sydney.

Due to regressive visa laws, international students and migrant visa holders in Australia have capped hours that they are allowed to work. Before the COVID-19 global pandemic, student visa holders were limited to 40 hours of paid work per fortnight.

Exorbitant tuition costs and the skyrocketing cost of living and rent drive many international students to work many more hours in highly exploitative, low-wage, unsafe and insecure conditions.

For a short time during the pandemic, the Australian federal government relaxed and even removed completely the cap on hours that student visa holders could work, however, from July 1, restrictions will be reintroduced by the Albanese Labor government at a rate of 48 hours a fortnight.

"After July I can't work more than 24 hours a week," Mohammed said. "I'm looking for a new job because I can't rely on my current income after July. I have to find new work that will give me more money."

"At the moment, I work 24–25 hours a week. Sometimes I work 30 hours if I have time. If I get holidays, I work 40 hours a week. It depends on my availability," Mohammed noted. "There're not much savings left after paying the bill and the rent. Mostly my income goes to paying the rent."

The student said that the rising cost of living as a result of soaring inflation impacts international students.

"The price of food has increased a lot since last year. It affects our budget. We have a small amount we get from our job. Most of the time we have to go beyond our budget, and it's not good, because we need to save

our money," Mohammed said.

"Our final exams are coming up, and we can't work then so I need to save up to pay my rent," the student continued. "It's a stress."

"The picture that Australia portrays among international students before they come here is a lot different to what happens when you come and live here. We heard that they support students, but when I came here it was a very different scenario," Mohammed said.



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