Australia: High school students protest against far-right One Nation

Our reporters
15 November 2026

Hundreds of high school students in Melbourne walked out of classes on Thursday to protest against the rise of the far-right One Nation party. The demonstration was part of a nationwide school strike, with protests also held in Sydney and other major cities.

The protests took place just over two weeks before the Victorian state election, amid a surge in support for One Nation and the prospect of the party entering government. Liberal leader Jess Wilson has confirmed that her party will preference One Nation, underscoring the far right's growing integration into the political establishment not only in Victoria but nationally.

The participation of young people reflected genuine alarm over these developments. Many are deeply concerned about the rise of fascistic forces internationally, the danger of war and the worsening social conditions confronting their generation.

The Melbourne rally was organised by High School Anti-Capitalists, a group directed by the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative (SAlt).

High school students delivered impassioned speeches denouncing Pauline Hanson, racism, inequality and the major parliamentary parties. These were interspersed with repeated chants, including "Hanson, f*** off!" There were references to capitalism and even socialism, but virtually no political content was given to either. Nor did these references have any connection to the perspective actually advanced by the speakers.

One student, warning that young people faced a future dominated by fascism, declared that the answer was to "organise and to organise and to f***ing organise." This summed up the political message of the rally: more protests and more shouting in the streets.

The responsibility for this bankrupt perspective lies not with the students, but with SAlt. For all its radical-sounding rhetoric, SAlt's protest politics offer no way forward beyond attempting to pressure the existing political establishment as it hurtles to the right.

There was no serious explanation of how One Nation has been able to exploit mounting social anger. Despite denunciations of Labor, nothing was said about the central responsibility of Labor governments and the trade union bureaucracies for creating the conditions in which the far right has grown.

Labor has presided over the destruction of jobs, declining living standards and attacks on public services, while the unions have isolated and suppressed workers' struggles. One Nation exploits the resulting disaffection, fraudulently posturing as an opponent of the establishment while scapegoating immigrants for the social crisis.

SAlt's electoral front the Victorian Socialists (VS) exposes the political logic of such protest politics. VS, which is contesting the November 28 election on a platform of paltry reforms, was not mentioned at the rally. Nor were students told that it is calling on voters to preference Labor, a party of big business and war whose record has paved the way for One Nation's rise.

SAlt's's noisy protest politics and VS's parliamentary reformism are two sides of the same coin. The former seeks to confine young people's opposition to protests and appeals to those in power; the latter channels it behind Labor and the Greens through the fraud of lesser-evil politics— covering up the reality that massive austerity, not reform, is what capitalism and its political representatives offer.

Through VS, SAlt is seeking to join the very political establishment that is hurtling to the right, expressing the interests of a privileged layer of the upper-middle class seeking a greater share of political power and influence.

The political control exercised by SAlt was underscored when Morgan Peach, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for Northern Metropolitan, requested to address the rally. An adult SAlt organiser refused to allow him to speak, preventing students from hearing an alternative socialist perspective.

In his prepared remarks, Peach explained that One Nation exploited anger over the cost of living, housing and collapsing public services while defending the capitalist system responsible for the crisis. Its rise was part of an international process in which sections of the ruling class were promoting fascistic forces amid escalating war and attacks on the working class.

He pointed to the recent American midterm elections, in which millions voted against Trump, only for the Democrats to pledge continued collaboration with his administration. The

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Albanese Labor government had similarly committed itself to working closely with Trump.

"Appeals to Labor will not stop One Nation. Labor itself is responsible for the far right's rise," Peach declared in his prepared speech.

"The far right cannot be defeated through sporadic protests, appeals to the political establishment or electing supposedly lesser-evil capitalist parties."

Instead, he argued, what was required was "an independent mass movement of the working class, aimed at taking political power, expropriating the corporate and financial oligarchy, and reorganising society on the basis of social equality."

Peach urged students to turn to the working class and fight to unite its struggles internationally on a revolutionary socialist program.

The seriousness of the concerns motivating the students was evident in interviews conducted by the *World Socialist Web Site* at the Melbourne and Sydney demonstrations.

Liv and Grace, Year 11 students attending the Melbourne rally, spoke about their fears for the future.

Liv said: "I'm scared, terrified, for our future generation with the far right on the rise around the world. One Nation could come into government here. I'm very aware of what's happening in France too, and I was shocked when Trump got re-elected."

Grace added: "I have family in America, and to think that that's coming here with Hanson is concerning."

Liv agreed that One Nation was blaming immigrants for a social crisis caused by capitalism and that Labor's attacks on workers' living standards had paved the way for the far right.

"Labor has completely lost touch with the working class," she said. "Hanson says she's all about representing people from lower socio-economic places, but that's so not true. She hates them!"

Dash and Luca had travelled from Kyneton, in regional Victoria, and had participated in previous school strikes.

Dash said: "We want to fight fascism and the bigotry of One Nation. Despite what they say, they're not for the people at all. They only advocate for the benefit of the 1 percent in society, not the rest of the population."

Luca added: "One Nation's policies will clearly only benefit the rich. They discriminate against immigrants and minorities."

He pointed to the international wave of student protests as a major influence on his political outlook.

"I'm really inspired by what's happening in Europe, with the protests in France and Albania. Students are realising what's wrong with the world and want to fight against it."

CJ connected the growth of the far right to widening social inequality.

"There's a lot of money going towards billionaires when it shouldn't be. One Nation wants the billionaires to remain really rich, they don't want to help us," she said.

CJ described the difficulties facing working-class families. Her mother had worked "three jobs for as long as I can remember," she said, adding that workers had been struggling for years while wealth was being "funnelled upwards into other people."

She also expressed concern about the escalating danger of war, referring to Iran, Gaza and Ukraine. "It's getting scary. It's slowly ramping up."

At the **Sydney protest**, Astrid similarly rejected One Nation's claims to represent ordinary people.

"We're here because we want to fight against Pauline Hanson and One Nation's policies," she said.

Astrid described Hanson as being "for the rich people, instead of the people who actually matter and contribute to our country every single day."

She opposed One Nation's anti-immigrant rhetoric, saying: "I think it puts people against each other, and it ruins the whole point—being one as a community."

Astrid added: "I think it's really important that we all come together, and we realise that the colour of our skin, our culture, and our religion doesn't make us any different than each other, and we're all just humans fighting for the same thing, which is to live happily."

When WSWS reporters raised the SEP's perspective of building an international movement of workers and young people, Astrid responded positively.

"Yes, definitely. And we already see it happening across other countries at the moment. So many young people joining together to fight for very similar things!"

A **21-year-old French journalism student**, in Australia on an internship, drew parallels between the political situation in Australia and France.

"I agree with you that governments are responsible for the rise of the far-right parties. Also, the media bears a lot of responsibility. In Australia, in France and other countries, the media gives a lot of credit to the far right."

She criticised French President Emmanuel Macron, pointing to the Gaza genocide, inflation and attacks on protests.

"I think young people are waking up, starting to see that the problems they face are the same all over the world."

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